“Behind the veil, brotherhood is forged in blood, not trust.”

Prologue: “Whispers in the Firelight”

The night settles deep in the Big Horn Mountains in a remote and nearly inaccessible pass called‘The Hole-in-the-Wall. Flickering campfires draw long shadows—each one hiding a tale of gold, betrayal, and secrets not meant for daylight. Among these shadows, the Wild Bunch gathers, plotting their next move. But out beyond the safety of the flames, something—or someone—is listening. Whispers mingle with the wind, and every crack of a branch could be friend or foe. Is it folklore, or is fear coming to life?

The coffee came out of the pot black as gun oil, slopping into tin cups while the last of evening was gone; the sky was almost pure night. Around the fire, the outlaws took their places one by one, boots scuffing dirt, eyes narrowed against the smoke and the long miles behind them. By the time the cook shuffled back to his pans, the crew was settled in the flicker of the flames, cradling their coffee like it was the only honest thing they owned, and waiting to hear what the next job would cost them.

Butch was the last to settle in and the first to break the silence. “Listen up, boys. Word is there’s gold moving near the border—easy pickings if we’re fast and quiet.”

“Bitterroot country?” Kilpatrick cut in.

Cassidy fixed his stare on Ben until the whole group fell silent. “Like I was saying before I got interrupted,” he drawled, “here’s the next job.”

For the next few minutes, Butch laid out the plan. A large gold transport would be stopping in Hamilton, traveling by stagecoach. He told Carver to find out the stage’s schedule and route.

The Kid spoke up. “Me, Kilpatrick, and Curry can block the trail—drop trees, roll some boulders. We’ll make sure that coach stops right where we want. Right spot for cover, and a quick getaway.”

Kilpatrick leaned in, a grin on his face. “We hit those coaches, we split the haul six ways. That’s enough for all of us to disappear for a year.”

Suddenly, the yipping coyotes fell silent; even the wind seemed to change, carrying a chill. An uneasy quiet settled over the camp. “Grizzly” Bill Hawkins stood up, his voice heavy. “Some things out there are worth more than a year’s pay. I rode the Bitterroots back when I was young. Folks say there’s stories—hollow men wandering the woods, signal fires burning on the ridges. They call 'em Grim Veil Brotherhood.”

Elzy Lay shrugged, trying to break the tension. “That’s just campfire talk, Bill. Ghosts and shadows and stories for scaring kids.”

Flat-nose Curry’s expression hardened. “I seen their mark, long ago. Skull and veil painted on a tree. Never slept easy after that. Wind never sounds the same up there. Don’t tempt those hills, boys.”

The Kid flashed a grin. “Stories don’t rattle me, but I listen to a man who’s stared them down and kept riding.”

Cassidy tightened his grip on his revolver. “Long as we stick together, no gang, ghost, or legend’s going to lay a hand on us.”

A branch cracked somewhere out in the dark. Horses stomped and flicked their ears, uneasy.

One-Eyed Pete whispered, “Quiet… Did you hear that? Someone’s out there.”

As the campfire danced shadows across uneasy faces, the Wild Bunch wondered if those old tales were more than night whispers. Just beyond the reach of the fire’s glow, someone lingered—silent, unseen—waiting for the perfect moment to strike, or simply listening, as secrets slipped through the cold night air.

Chapter 1: “Noise in the Hollow”

Cassidy's hand slipped to his holster. All eyes fixed on the darkness. Just trying to focus on some movement. Kilpatrick stood as Cassidy did. Sundance moved as well, gun drawn, boots crunching in brittle dirt. The men followed, breath frosting, every crag and sagebrush now alive with menace. They fanned out, lanterns trembling with each step, searching for what crept beyond the edge of their firelight. And as they moved forward, the noise stopped.

Was it just the wind after all—or was something else prowlin’ the shadows, drawn by the whiff of outlaw gold in the Wyoming night?

Kid Curry let out a crooked chuckle, low so’s not to spook the men. “We get to jawin’ about spooks and haints, boys, we’ll have every last one of us seein’ things ain’t there,” he muttered, leaning his shoulder to the log wall.

Cassidy’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the gloom. “Ain’t a man among us who’d’ve heard the same racket if nothin’ was out yonder,” he said, slow and steady, voice never rising above a whisper. “So hush up your gums. Drop low and spread out.”

Cassidy and Sundance, who had been running together a couple of years, eased toward the mouth of the ravine, boots grinding frost-stiff sage into the hard ground. The gulch ahead was a slit of black in the red wall, breathing cold air.

“You really think there’s anybody out there?” Sundance asked, keeping his voice low, trusting Cassidy knew this country better than any map.

“Seeley swore this place is so far off the trail even the coyotes get lost,” Cassidy muttered. “Doesn’t mean I’m betting my hide on it. I’d rather jump at shadows than get cut in my sleep.”

They hadn’t been out five minutes when a raw, panicked yell tore out of the dark. Both men froze, fingers tightening on cold iron.

They moved toward the sound, splitting without a word, sliding through the brush to come in from both sides. Cassidy almost fired when a shape lurched out of the gloom—Flat Nose Curry, wild-eyed, breath coming in white bursts.

“Curry, what’s going on?” Butch snapped.

“He’s dead!” George rattled, voice breaking. “His throat’s gone. I just turned my head for a second and he—he—”

“Did you see who did this, George?” Sundance pushed, already scanning the dark beyond him.

Cassidy dropped to a knee in the brittle sage, eyes tracing scuffed dirt, broken stems, anything that might tell a story. Kid and Bill pounded up, guns out, questions spilling that nobody could answer. Elzy and Kilpatrick ghosted in right behind them.

Pete lay on his back in the brush, eyes wide, neck a black slash in the starlight. For a long second nobody spoke. Then, one by one, they formed a rough circle around him, backs touching, muzzles pointed into the dark.

The ravine swallowed every sound. No hoofbeats. No wind. Just the harsh rasp of outlaw breathing and the steady, waiting silence of something out there that had already killed once and might not be done.

Cassidy worked his jaw, then spoke, calm and cold.
“Keep your backs tight and your barrels up. If you hear anything in that dark—anything—you pour lead into it till the hammer clicks dry. We sort out what’s left come daylight.”

The words had barely left his mouth when a single stone clattered down the ravine wall.
Every gun snapped toward the sound. No one breathed.

A flash of movement beyond the circle. Half the men opened fire, muzzle flare lighting up twisted shadows, sage torn in the wild spray of bullets. When the shooting stopped, only the cold wind answered.

Their circle, so tight before, felt suddenly far too small—and out there, somewhere in that ravine, something waited for the sun.

When the echoes of gunfire finally died, the men pushed out of the circle, boots sliding over loose rock and torn sage. Smoke hung low, stinging their throats as they spread through the dark, hunting for whatever they’d hit.

Cassidy’s lantern beam caught a shape crumpled in the brush.
“Over here,” he called, voice flat.

They closed in on a lean figure facedown in the dirt, coat shredded, back punched through in three places. Cassidy rolled him with the toe of his boot and the light found his face.

“Dusty Rowe,” Sundance breathed. “Son of a—”

Dusty, the man who’d walked out on them. A deserter. A ghost they all thought was long gone.

Somehow he was still clinging to the edge. His eyes fluttered, blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth. Cassidy dropped to a knee, fisting Dusty’s collar.

“Why, Dusty?” Butch’s voice was low, dangerous. “Why come back? Why Pete?”

Dusty’s lips moved. A rasp of air.
“It wasn’t—” he managed, eyes flicking past Cassidy, searching the dark behind him.

The rest never came.

Cassidy’s face went hot and wet in the same instant the shot cracked. Dusty’s head snapped back, a neat hole opening dead-center in his forehead. For a heartbeat nobody moved. Then Dusty sagged out of Cassidy’s grip like a cut rope.

Butch wiped the blood from his eyes and spun on the circle of men.
“Who fired?” he roared.

Silence. Boots shifted. No one met his gaze.

“I said, who fired?”

One by one, their eyes dragged toward the same man. Kilpatrick stood a step back from the others, gun still smoking faintly in his hand.

Butch was on him in three strides, shoving him hard in the chest.
“Why’d you do that?” Cassidy snarled. “He was about to talk. I needed to know why he turned on us, why Pete’s dead in the dirt back there.”

Kilpatrick didn’t flinch, didn’t bother to wipe the powder flecks off his cheek. He just stared past Cassidy at Dusty’s body.

“That man’s tongue never told the truth a day in his life,” Kilpatrick said softly. “You don’t build a camp on rotten boards.”

The words settled heavy. No one answered.

Out in the dark beyond their lantern light, the ravine felt suddenly wider. If Dusty hadn’t slit Pete’s throat, someone else had—someone close enough to cut a man’s neck and vanish, and now the only man who might have cleared it up lay bleeding into the sage.

Chapter 2: “Leaving Holes Behind”

Horses move in uneasy silence as Cassidy and the gang ride away from the battered timbers of the Hole. The sharp morning sun glints off stirrups and six-shooters, casting long shadows across the hard Wyoming earth. With each hoofbeat, dust swirls behind them—slowly settling in the gray dawn.

In the quiet foreground, a freshly turned patch of ground marks what’s left of Pete. A crude wooden cross leans against the mound, the only witness to last night’s violence and unfinished justice. The wind stirs, carrying with it the sound of fading voices, unspoken regrets, and the echo of things lost.

Behind them, the burial spot grows smaller—and with every mile, the gang carries the heavy weight of the holes left behind.

Cassidy rides hard, a fire smoldering in his gut—itching to put holes in someone, maybe a whole pack of someones. He’d buried too many brothers already. Pete wasn’t much to him—a good shot, not a good friend—but that kind of betrayal, coming from a man who used to share their campfire, gnaws at his mind like a wolf at a carcass. How could one of their own turn?

He tells himself to stay sharp. The job ahead leaves no room for ghosts or doubt. But how do you push betrayal out of your blood? Is there more rot in the gang—someone else ready to trade bullets for a payday? Cassidy’s eyes flick to the two men he does trust, the last two he still calls brother. Six days to the border. By then, he swears, he’ll have every answer he needs.

As dusk sets in, Cassidy finally turns, catching Sundance’s eye for the first time since they rode out. Neither speaks, but they both know. At the first camp tonight, it’ll be Cassidy, Sundance, and a hard conversation. The rest? Who knows. Butch and Cassidy—maybe the last men standing when the shooting starts. Cassidy can only guess what’s working through his old friend’s head. By nightfall, he aims to find out.

The sun was crawling down behind the distant buttes, painting the country red as the gang pressed on. Sweat and trail dust clung to every man. At a rise overlooking a shallow creek, Kilpatrick pulled up first.

As they crest a low ridge, one of the riders—maybe Sundance—pulls up short. In a clearing below, the faint outline of a tipi ring can be seen, half-buried by fresh grass and dust. Nearby, a shallow fire ring is cold but not long abandoned, with bones from a recent meal and the smell of charred sage still in the air.

Kilpatrick leans over in his saddle and points to a set of horse tracks—several unshod, one limping—and drag marks leading into the cottonwoods. Cassidy swings down to examine them, noticing a beadwork strand (maybe blue and yellow, the colors often favored by the Crow) caught on a low branch.

The wind shifts, carrying hints of smoke from farther upriver—too faint for a white camp, not the campfire style of outlaws. There’s also a stick with a feather tied to it, staked atop a nearby hill, acting as a boundary marker or signal.

Sundance, tense and low-voiced:
“Crow sign. Close, by the look of it. Maybe watching us now.”

Butch nods, eyes searching the bluffs:
“Let’s keep our eyes peeled and our rifles ready. Last thing we need’s a surprise from the Nation’s braves.”

The gang’s bodies screamed to stop, but they rode on—safety weighed more than comfort. They moved quieter now, nerves stretched thin, every shadow and sound a possible set of eyes in the fading light.

“Let’s push past that next rise,” someone muttered. “We’ll take another look then. Horses and men both are near spent—we can’t ride much longer.”

Almost 500 miles away, darkness swallowed the prairie as the four riders slipped deeper into enemy country. Somewhere behind, saddle leather creaked—then went silent. When they finally counted heads, one was gone. A quick, half-hearted search, a muttered curse. “He’s lost. Leave him.”

Alone now, the stray rider circled, heart pounding. He cupped his hands and shouted for the others—only to have the sound snatched away by the unnatural, complete quiet that had settled on the land. No birds. No wind. Even his horse’s breaths sounded too loud.

A shape flickered in the corner of his vision. Then another—half-glimpsed forms melting between the cottonwoods, just beyond the range of sense or rifle. Dread crawled up his spine. In a panic, he dug his boots into the American paint’s sides.

They tore through the brush, hooves smashing dry ground, speed fueled by terror. Ghostly shadows slid along the edges of his sight—never fully seen, but always there. He spurred harder, eyes fixed on a sliver of clearing breaking through the trees ahead.

The horse burst into the open like a shot—and suddenly the saddle was empty. The animal galloped on, wild-eyed and lathered, but never looking back.

The woods grew eerily still, the usual sound of birds and wind snuffed out as if the land itself was holding its breath. As the horse thundered on, the camera pans through the tangled brush—slow, uncertain—closing in on a gnarled cottonwood just feet from where the paint crashed through.

There, cut deep in the old bark, is a crude symbol: a capital G nestled tight inside a V. The groove is fresh, sap still shining in the dim light. The mark’s edges are rough—angry.

A crow calls once, sharp and sudden, then all is silent again. Shadows linger at the edge of vision, thickening between the branches. The air pulses with dread. Whatever left that sign is still out there, cloaked in the hush, watching. And the audience knows: the Grim Veil Brotherhood isn’t just a story told around dying campfires—they’re much, much closer than anyone dared believe.

Chapter 3: “The Road to Hamilton: Bound in Blood”

Butch scowled into the dying light. “Kid, I can’t shake last night. Pete is gone. Dusty? Kilpatrick? It’s like the whole outfit’s gone sideways. What do you make of it?”

Sundance shot him a crooked grin. “Cas, you’re wound tighter than that old cinch strap of yours. You saw Dusty same as me—back in Kaycee, belly-up at the saloon bar, trying to act invisible.”

Butch barked a laugh. “Yeah, I recall. Up on that second-floor balcony, playing mysterious in that filthy duster.”

Sundance's eyes sparkled. “In eighty-five degree sun, no less. Man was sweating buckets—looked like a preacher at poker night.”

Butch chuckled, the sour edge fading. “Thought he’d melt faster than a snowball in July.”

“Relax, Cas. If Dusty was trouble, we’d have seen it by now. Besides, if Kilpatrick double-crossed us, I’d wager he’d do it with more style—maybe poison the beans.”

Butch shook his head, a grin breaking through. “All right, Kid. I’ll stop hunting ghosts for now.”

“Good,” Sundance replied. “We got enough to watch for out here. Let’s get back before Carver burns the bacon again.”

Shoulders lighter, the two men turned back toward camp, ready to face the night together.

As the two rejoin the rest of the group, they grab their plates and sit down by the fire. Anybody got a good word tonight? George Curry asked.

Elzy stirs the fire with a stick, then looks up at the group with a sly grin.

“Fellas, you hear about the outlaw who went straight?”

They shake their heads.

“Yeah, turns out he just couldn’t handle the pressure. Said honest work was too much like hard labor!”

A few laughs rattle the darkness—exactly what a tired gang needs when trouble’s breathing down their necks.

“Hey, Butch, I hear tell you’re the fastest gun in the West,” Carver drawled.

“And you’re the fastest talker in the West,” Cassidy shot back. “Ain’t neither one of us payin’ taxes.”

“Somebody oughta come up with a word we can all agree on,” George said.

“Alibi!” Hawkins hollered, so dead serious the whole camp near fell in the fire laughin’.

Cassidy just grinned. He reached into his shirt and pulled out the photograph he kept there, the paper worn soft from sweat and time. For almost a year it had rested against his heart, close enough to feel every mile he rode.

The picture was of a young woman, all bright eyes and stubborn jaw, the kind of face a man could convince himself he loved even if he'd never said the words out loud. He had lost her up in Montana—not the kind of lost where you circle back and pick up the trail, but the kind where the trail simply ends. She had been taken, swallowed up by ghosts and hollow men who moved like smoke and called themselves the Grim Veil.

Butch turned the photograph over with a thumb that shook more than he liked. On the back, in a hand he knew better than his own, was the simple message:

To Butch Cassidy
Love, Ann Bassett

The piano clanged away, men drank, and half a dozen poker games crowded the tables at The Lost Horse Creek Saloon. The game in the back had turned sour enough that Sheriff Donally finally pushed off the bar and walked over.

"How you fellas doin'?" he asked.

Nobody answered. Chips clicked, cards slapped, but the talk died down.

"I said I asked you boys a question. I don't talk just to hear my own voice. There some kind of trouble here, or am I dreamin' it?"

Tommy cleared his throat, not quite meeting his eye. "No, Sheriff. We were gettin' out of hand, but we're settled now."

Sheriff Donally hooked a thumb at the empty chair. "You boys playin' short-handed, or is somebody missin'?"

Nobody moved. A vein jumped in Jeb's jaw.

Tommy said, "We… lost a man comin' over the range."

"Lost him how?" Donally asked, voice flat.

"Fog rolled in. Horses spooked. By the time it cleared, he was just… gone," Jeb muttered.

"Funny thing," the sheriff said. "Most times when a man's just gone, somebody's got more to say about it than that."

Tommy's cards shook a little as he picked up the next hand. "We ain't proud of it, Sheriff. But the Veil's bad country. We kept ridin'."

"Tommy wanted to go back," George blurted. "Jeb's the one said we'd be fools to turn around."

Jeb slammed his palm on the table. "You rode on same as the rest of us."

Donally hooked the empty chair with his boot and dragged it in, settling himself at the table. He set his glass down where the missing rider's drink ought to have been.

"You boys were smart not turnin' back," he said quietly. "You keep jawin' about whose fault it is and talk yourselves into ridin' after him, this whole table'll be empty by sunup."

The men shifted, but no one spoke.

"That stretch by the Veil," Donally went on, "ain't a place you slow down for. You ride it hard and you don't look left or right. There's plenty of evil in this world, but whatever's crouched in that country wears the rest of it like a Sunday coat."

Tommy swallowed. "You ever been in there, Sheriff?"

Donally's eyes stayed on the cards. "Been wearin' this star fifteen years. In all that time I ain't gone into the Veil, and I don't aim to start. Smart men skirt it. The others… well, they don't come through Hamilton to tell how it went."

He looked up at each of them in turn.

"So here's my advice, boys. Leave your friend to whatever's got him, say your prayers if you've a mind to, and don't let the Veil hear you speak its name twice in one night."

Chapter 4: Nightfall on the Bozeman Trail”

The eight of them pushed through the doors of the Occidental, trail dust in their cuffs and nothing left in their eyes but road. The lamps threw yellow light over a half-full bar, piano man working a tired tune.

Cassidy dropped a hand on the clerk’s ledger, signed them in for the night, then turned on his heel to face the others.

“This stop ain’t for pleasure, boys,” he said. “Wet your throats, then find a bed. We’re ridin’ for Ranchester at first light.”

He left them to the bar and shouldered up to the counter where Silas was wiping down glasses.

“Evenin’, Silas,” Cassidy said.

“Cassidy.” Silas gave him a quick nod. “Thought that was you draggin’ half of Johnson County in behind you. What’s the word?”

“Lookin’ for it,” Butch replied. “Anything we can’t live without?”

Silas leaned in a little, voice dropping. “Sheriff Canton and Bowers and McCall rode down to Kaycee with a prisoner string. Kline’s wearin’ the star in town till about noon tomorrow.” He snorted softly. “He was in here earlier, but that one’s home to tuck his young’uns in more nights than not.”

Cassidy’s shoulders eased a notch. “Good to hear. We’re light on funds, though. Need to scare up some cash and be gone by sun-up. Couple of my boys can stand in the door for you, keep the peace.”

Silas’ mouth twitched. “Could use a pair of big fellas between me and the cowhands. I’ll pay ’em fair.”

He jerked his chin toward a table near the back. “Got a gent outta California sittin’ that corner game. Calls himself a miner, but he’s too clean by half. Been rakin’ in pots all evenin’.”

Cassidy followed his gaze.

“You reckon he’s lucky?” he asked.

“I reckon he ain’t near as lucky as he thinks,” Silas said. “Might be a good night for you to test that.”

Cassidy slid into the empty chair across from the Californian, nodding to the men already in the game.

“Seat open?” he asked.

“For now,” the Californian said, neat mustache, cuffs too clean for trail dust. “Game’s five-card draw. Name’s Carter.”

“Name’s Cassidy. I’ll let the cards handle introductions after that.”

Silas brought a fresh deck, broke the old one with a practiced scoop. “New man, new pasteboards,” he said. “Blinds stay the same. You boys play nice, or my door guards’ll walk you out by the ears.”

Carter smiled thinly. “I’m always nice when I’m winnin’.”

Cassidy glanced at the modest stack in front of him. “Reckon that makes you downright charitable tonight, then.”

Silas dealt. Cards whispered around the table.

The first hand went quiet. Small pot, Carter folding early.

Second hand, Carter opened.

“Two dollars to see the flop,” he said, voice smooth.

“Ain’t no flop in draw, friend,” Cassidy said mildly, sliding in his coins. “But I’ll pay to see you try and find one.”

The others chuckled. Carter’s eyes narrowed just a shade.

“Dealer take two,” one ranch hand muttered.

Cassidy tapped his cards. “I’ll take one, Silas.”

Carter waved his off. “I’m good. Man ought to stand pat once in a while, show faith in himself.”

“Or his luck,” Cassidy said.

Bets went around. Pot swelled.

Carter laid down his hand first with a little flourish. “Queens over jacks.”

The ranch hand cursed low. “Beats hell outta my pair of tens.”

Cassidy turned his cards one by one. “Kings over nines.”

Carter’s smile flattened. “Seems I’m payin’ tuition tonight.”

“School’s open late in Buffalo,” Cassidy said, dragging the pot. “Plenty of learnin’ to be had.”

Another deal. Another hand. Whiskey warmed the table, but Cassidy’s eyes stayed cold.

“You ride far, Mr. Carter?” Cassidy asked as he peeked at his cards.

“From California, like your barkeep said,” Carter answered. “Work the camps, work the riverboats. Cards treat me kind. Yourself?”

“Work the rails now and again,” Cassidy said. “Cards treat me how they’re stacked.”

One of Cassidy’s boys, posted by the door, chuckled at that. Carter pretended not to hear.

Carter opened again, heavier this time. “Five to call.”

The ranch hand hesitated, then threw in. “You been draggin’ chips off me all night. Time I see what I’m feedin’.”

Cassidy tossed his coins in easy. “Be a shame to disappoint him, Carter.”

Draw went round. Ranch hand took three, desperate. Cassidy took none.

Carter squinted. “Standin’ pat, are you?”

“Just sittin’ with what the Lord gave me,” Cassidy said.

Betting came back to Carter. He pushed a larger stack forward. “Make it fifteen more.”

The ranch hand swore and folded. “You two can have at it. I ain’t that curious.”

Cassidy looked at the pot, then at Carter’s neat cuffs.

“Man with hands that clean,” he said softly, “usually keeps one card cleaner’n the rest.”

A flicker crossed Carter’s face.

“You accusin’ me of somethin’?” he asked.

“Not yet,” Cassidy replied. “I’m raisin’ you ten for the trouble.”

Silas’ gaze sharpened, but he kept dealing drinks, listening.

Carter’s jaw worked. He called, fingers a touch too tight on the chips.

“Let’s see it, Wyoming,” he said.

Cassidy spread his cards. “Straight to the queen.”

Carter snapped his hand down—two pair, jacks and tens—and swore under his breath.

“Hell of a river you’re ridin’ there,” he muttered.

“Like I said,” Cassidy answered, raking in the pot, “cards treat me how they’re stacked.”

He let the words hang just long enough.

“Now, if you figure they’re stacked wrong,” he added, “we can have Silas shuffle ’em right in front of God and everybody.”

Silas held up his hands. “Cards are clean. I ain’t runnin’ a crooked house. Last man calls me a cheat eats splinters on the boardwalk.”

The ranch hand nodded toward Cassidy. “Ain’t the house I’m worried on. It’s this fella’s luck.”

Carter forced a laugh, trying to shake off the sting. “Luck don’t last forever.”

Cassidy smiled without warmth. “Don’t have to. Just needs to hold till sun-up.”

He tapped the edge of his stack, eyes never leaving Carter’s.

“You in for another, California,” he asked, “or you ridin’ out light tonight?”

“I’m done. Ain’t no sense in goin’ broke,” Carter said, pushing back from the table. “Obliged for the game, the talk—and most of all the money.”

He tipped two fingers off his hat brim and drifted away from the table.

A little later, Butch joined his men. “That’s enough for one night, boys. Dawn comes early. Find a mattress.”

Boots thudded down the hall. Doors creaked. Before long the Occidental settled into the soft chorus of men snoring behind thin walls.

Hours later, a latch clicked. One door eased open. A shadow slipped out into the lamplight strip and then into the alley’s dark.

The meeting was quick, words low and flat.

“Dusty’s dead,” the newcomer said. “Kilpatrick put a bullet in him before he could open his mouth. Nobody’s the wiser.”

“We still on for Hamilton?” the other asked.

“Yeah. Big gold job. They’re ridin’ for Ranchester tomorrow.”

“Ranchester’s no good,” the second voice said. “Too many eyes. We wait till Hamilton—after they’ve done the stealin’ for us. Then we take the whole haul.”

A pause. A breath that sounded a lot like a smile.

“I want Butch to hurt,” he added. “I want him to see it comin’.”

Bootsteps scraped once more, then faded. The alley went still.

Chapter 5: “The Taking of the Veil”

The saloon went dark hours ago, but Tommy was still awake, staring at the cracked ceiling of the room he’d rented over the horseshoe stable. The others—Jeb and George, —slept heavy, their snores thick as the whiskey they’d drowned themselves in. But Tommy couldn’t shake the sound of Clay’s voice fading in the wind, or the look on the men’s faces when his horse broke through the veil empty. “We should have gone back.” he whispered.

Outside, the night had gone cold and mean. The lamps in town sputtered low, painting the street in yellow skin and shadow. Tommy rose, boots quiet on the worn floorboards. He buckled on his gun belt, slung his coat over his shoulders, and stepped out into it.

The horse shifted under him when he swung into the saddle, like it knew where he meant to go. East, into the Grim Veil country—a place of broken stone and hungry wind. No one with sense rode there in the middle of the dark. The others had said Clay was done for anyway. “What’s one man to the night out there?” Jeb had said. Tommy had agreed then. But he’d been lying.

By the time he left the last lantern light of Hamilton behind, his hands were stiff around the reins, his breath white in the dark. He rode into the black land where fear walked without sound, where the stars hid their faces. Ahead lay the country that had swallowed his friend, and behind him—the comfort of men who had chosen fear over loyalty.

The moon high in the sky, looked like a tarnished coin, and Tommy rode on.

Tommy stepped into the Veil where they’d left Clay, and the world was nothing but rock and moonlight.

The moon hung swollen and white above the broken country, laying cold silver on the stone teeth and scrub, but the shadows between them were black as a well. The horse blew hard behind him, ears pinned, refusing to come any farther. Tommy slipped the reins over a dead juniper branch, drew his revolver, and walked on alone.

The silence was wrong. No crickets, no owls, no far-off yip of coyotes. Just his own boots rasping on grit and the faint creak of leather with every breath. Out here the dark felt close and thick, like he was wading into it. He tried to picture what he was looking for—a shack, maybe, half sunk into a gully; a cave mouth blacker than the rock; a fresh-dug pit—but the Veil swallowed every shape and gave nothing back.

“Clay,” he called once, low. The sound went nowhere. It left his mouth and seemed to fall straight down, like there was no sky to carry it.

He pushed deeper. The country folded and twisted around him: dry washes, boulders piled like broken gravestones, thorn brush grabbing at his coat. The farther he went, the more he felt the line behind him—where a man could still turn back. At some point he stepped past it. He knew it. Every step from there was a promise. He wasn’t leaving another man in this place, not again.

An hour dragged by, or maybe more; time frayed in the dark. His legs ached, his throat burned from the cold air, and the moon slid higher and meaner. He was starting to think the Veil really was empty when the first sound came.

It was small at first. A scrape, like a boot sole on stone, somewhere to his left. He froze, gun half raised, listening. Nothing. Then another, behind him. Then two more, off to the right. Soft, quick, there and gone.

“Clay?” His voice came out dry and thin. The dark pressed closer.

The sounds came again. More of them. Footsteps. Breaths. A low rustle, like cloth sliding over rock. They circled him, never in the same place twice, too many to count. Every time he turned toward one, it jumped to his back. They were close—he could feel it, could feel the weight of eyes on his neck—but the moon showed him nothing.

The noise grew. Boots on stone, gravel rolling, a murmur that might have been voices, just under hearing. It built and built, all around him, like a crowd gathering in a church with no walls. It got into his head, into his teeth. He couldn't pick out one sound from another. Couldn't find a target. Couldn't think.

"Show yourself!" he yelled, and his own voice sounded strange, thin in that roaring hush.

The Veil answered with more noise, a rising rush that drowned him. His heart slammed. His hand shook. He snapped, dragged the revolver up, and started firing.

The muzzle flare tore white holes in the dark. He spun as he shot, blasting at shadows that leapt back before he could see them. Each report cracked against the stone and came back as a dozen ghost shots, until it sounded like a war all around him. Dust and cordite stung his nose. He kept pulling the trigger long after he'd lost all sense of aim, just trying to punch a hole in the noise.

Click.

The last chamber fell on empty. The roaring did not.

Tommy stood there panting, gun still up, ears ringing, and the sounds rushed in to fill the space the bullets had left. Footsteps, heavy and sure now. Voices, low and eager. Steel kissing steel. The dark moved.

Shapes broke loose from the rock. Men. Dozens of them, maybe more, pouring out of the gaps and gullies, faces cut by shadow, teeth and eyes catching moonlight like animal things. Some had rifles, some carried chains and clubs, but most held long, dull blades that glinted wet along the edges. Machetes.

Tommy stumbled back, trying to thumb fresh rounds into his gun, but hands grabbed him—too many hands. They came from behind, from the side, from the ground itself. Fingers like iron clamped his wrists, his shoulders, his hair. The first blade bit into his ribs, hot and sharp. The second took his leg out from under him. He went down hard, breath torn from his chest, and the sky spun.

He screamed then. For Clay. For mercy. For anything.

The Veil didn't answer. The men did.

The blades rose and fell in a rhythm, fast and workmanlike. The pain came in white flashes, then in red smears, then in nothing at all. The last thing he knew was the moon swimming above him, smeared by the spray on his face, and the sound of men laughing like they were cutting meat.

"Enough," a voice said.

The machetes stopped mid-swing. The crowd pulled back, parting down the middle. Boots sounded slow on stone, each step sure, unhurried. A man walked up through that lane of killers, long coat trailing dust, hat brim shadowing his face. The moon found the scar across his jaw and the pale, unreadable eyes.

He looked down at what was left of Tommy Shaw and then up into the dark, as if the Veil itself were listening.

Malachar Grayveil stood motionless.

“He’s one of the four that rode through yesterday,” Grayveil said, his voice flat as dry earth. “I don’t feel like waiting on the other two.”

A big man with a thick beard and a cold smile stepped forward, blood spattered up his sleeves. Rafe Donner.

“Take a few men into Hamilton,” Gray went on. “Find those two and bring them back. I am tired of heroes.”

Rafe nodded once.

“And Rafe,” Gray added, eyes drifting back to Tommy’s broken body, “remind Donally we’re in charge. If he needs convincing, let him know I can come visit.”

Rafe grinned, the blades around him lifting again in the moonlight.

“Reckon he’ll understand,” he said.

Out in the black beyond the stones, Tommy’s horse jerked at its reins, then went still, ears pricked toward the Veil as the night swallowed the last of the voices.

Chapter 6: “One Night, One Score in Ranchester”

The whole Bunch was making good time. They all knew what waited at the end of the trail. The Brook Mine was loaded with concentrates worth more than any bank vault they had ever seen, and word was the payroll would be on-site too. Winchester had only heard about it the night before, half drunk and talking about the old days when Coy slid onto the stool beside him and started in about a job in Ranchester you’d have to be a fool to pass up. Said it was bigger than anything Cassidy had ever pulled. They jawed back and forth, the way old hands do when the whiskey is warm and the past feels closer than the room they’re in, and before the bottle ran dry they had themselves a plan.

Coy offered to ride along, bringing two of his men: Johnny and Roy. Butch agreed, on one condition. They would plan it in the saddle. No wasted days. No sitting on their hands. They would think it through as they rode north, then stop at the edge of Ranchester and lay it all out proper. No sense in rushing a job like this. Not when it could make them all rich or bury them where they stood.

By the time they made their stop, the Bunch was dusted, hungry, but wired with that tight feeling that comes before a big score. Around the fire, when the maps and scraps of information finally came out, it slipped: it wasn’t Coy who had first heard of the job. It was Roy. The air around the circle went still. Men who had ridden together for years suddenly watched each other with their hands a little closer to their guns. Questions hung there between them like smoke. Kid and Kilpatrick pushed back hard on the doubt, talking calm and easy, reminding everyone how many times they’d ridden into worse and come out laughing. Slowly, the shoulders dropped, the jaws unclenched, and they moved on with the planning—if not with the same trust they’d started with.

Out past the firelight, just beyond the reach of the Bunch’s voices, two figures watched the glow. One shifted, uneasy.

“You said Ranchester was no good,” he muttered. “Too many eyes. Too many people asking questions. You said stay clear. So what’s changed? I think—”

“You don’t get paid to think,” the other man cut in, voice low and hard. “You get paid to do what you’re told.”

The first man fell quiet, jaw working. The second didn’t look away from the fire. From Cassidy.

“You keep forgetting something,” he said. “Cassidy didn’t hurt you. Not the way he hurt me.”

He swallowed, like the words themselves burned going down.

“It was him brought the Grim Veil into her life,” he went on. “His jobs. His people. His trails. They took her. My sister. My only sister.”

His voice cracked on that word, just once, before he forced it steady again.

“They put her in a mask and a gray hood and turned her into one of them… and when they were done, they put her in the ground. She’s dead, and he’s still out here breathing. Laughing. Riding into another score like none of it ever happened.”

He drew a slow breath, hands curling into fists at his sides.

“But not for long,” he said, almost a promise. “He brought the Grim Veil to her. I’ll bring them to him. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Miles to the west, in the quiet streets of Hamilton, Jeb and George were saddling up to head back to Idaho. No idea what happened to Tommy.

“Bet the fool rode back for Clay,” Jeb said. “Why couldn’t he just let go?”

“Would you want him to let go of you?” George snapped.

“I wouldn’t’ve been dumb enough to get lost.”

“I don’t think Clay meant—”

“Hey, fellas,” a beautiful young woman said, cutting across the argument.

“Just heading back to Idaho,” George offered.

“Ahh,” she sighed, big eyes softening. “I was hoping to have a little fun. We don’t get many strangers in Hamilton. It’s nice to see some new, handsome faces.”

Jeb and George traded a look, and the edge in their shoulders eased. The women laughed at their jokes, leaned in close, let a hand brush an arm here and there. The talk warmed, the whiskey warmed, and the men’s guard slipped, inch by inch.

The next thing Jeb and George knew, the world was dark and swaying. Hoods over their heads. Wrists lashed. Ankles bound. They were hog-tied across the backs of horses like carcasses headed to market.

When the small column rode into camp, Grayveil stepped out to meet them, already certain the work was done. If Rafe was involved, it was done right. Twelve years together and the man had never failed him. The two women slid down from their saddles, heads bowed.

“Good,” Grayveil said. “No beatings for you tonight.”

Among the Grim Veil, that was as close to praise as anyone got. The Brotherhood kept women the way they kept stock—some who came of their own will, most who didn’t. If you were pretty and unlucky enough to live within reach, Malachar found a way to pull you into the Veil. It was how he fed the hunger that never seemed to leave his eyes.

The prisoners were cut loose just long enough to be dragged off the horses and thrown into the dirt. The hoods came off.

“Wh–wha–what is this?” George stammered.

A club cracked down on his jaw. He went limp.

Jeb didn’t say a word. He saw the club and decided he’d used up all his questions for the night.

“Welcome to the Veil,” Malachar said, arms opening like a preacher greeting new souls. “I’d love to show you boys around, but you’re not going to live that long.”

“Oh, mister, please don’t—”

Another blow silenced George’s sobbing.

“The name is Grayveil,” the man with the club hissed.

“Take them to the cages,” Malachar said. His voice lost all warmth. “I want this done where everyone can see it. Let them all understand why I hate heroes.”

Thirteen cages stood in a row, side by side, each one rattling with fear. Women and men huddled together in the straw, eyes wide, fingers white on the bars. As Jeb and what was left of George were dragged past, Jeb felt his stomach drop. One of the faces in the cages looked familiar.

“Clay?” Jeb croaked. “Clay, you’re ok—”

The last word never left his mouth. The blow that dropped him came from nowhere and took everything with it.

When the Brotherhood finally drifted away, laughter and boots fading into the night, Clay started to cry. He couldn’t help it. The sound just tore loose.

“Please don’t cry, mister,” a small voice whispered from the shadows of the cage. “They don’t like noise. They punish for noise. Please don’t cry. It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.”

“These were my friends,” Clay choked. “They came back for me. I can’t help it.”

“What’s your name mister?” she asked gently.

“Clay,” he croaked. His voice was almost gone from all the days events. He then whispered, “What’s your name?”

“Ann,” she softly answered. “My name is Ann Bassett.”

Chapter 7: “The Revelation in Ranchester”

The planning was done.

The men crouched in the pale predawn, breaths puffing in the brisk mountain air as they watched lantern light twitch inside the mine office. Boots scraped softly over gravel, every step measured, nerves pulled tight as wire. Coy’s crew and Carver held the south side of the sagging timber building. Grizzly and George ghosted the security men along the north edge, just beyond lantern range. Cassidy, Sundance, Kilpatrick and the rest waited in the shadows near the door, horses tied in a loose line below the tailings pile.

All that was left was for the last of the security detail to finish its slow sweep. When they cleared the back corner, they’d have fifteen brutal minutes. Fifteen minutes to crack the battered safe, scoop up the payroll and the sacks of heavy concentrates, and be gone into the dark pines before daylight or gunfire pinned them to the Old Brook Mine.

George saw the guards turn away from the office and head down the path. He put two fingers to his lips and sent out a low whistle.

The gang came alive.

Coy and his crew slid tighter around the perimeter, Carver taking the far corner. Grizzly and George peeled off and followed the security men, just out of sight, ready to signal if anything turned sideways. Cassidy led the rest through the door toward the pay day. Elzy took station outside, watch in hand.

“Five,” he would call, every time the minutes died.

Inside, Kilpatrick made short work of the lock. The door gave, and the crew spilled into the cramped office. Cassidy led the group heading for the strongroom and the concentrates. Sundance took his men to the safe where the payroll should have been.

“Clock’s running,” Sundance muttered. “Let’s move.”

Cassidy stepped into the strongroom and stopped. Burlap sacks were stacked to the ceiling—more than any of them had expected. The air stank of dust and metal.

His eyes widened. “Look at this,” he breathed.

Carver pushed in behind him, jaw going slack. “Forget the payroll,” he said. “There’s more here than we could pack in four trips.”

Cassidy snapped back to himself. “No. We need instant cash. These sacks won’t pay out for a month, maybe two. They’re promised money, not money we can spend today.”

Carver jabbed a thumb at the pile. “All we need to do is load this. We can forget Hamilton.”

Cassidy rounded on him. “No, we can’t. Hamilton is happening. Too much time, too much work. We finish here, then we ride.”

He jerked his chin at the door. “Go get Coy and his men. Everyone takes two sacks. By the time they’re loaded, Sundance will have the cash and we all ride together.”

Elzy’s voice drifted faint from outside. “Five!”

Johnny was first through the doorway, big shoulders filling the frame as he strode toward the burlap. Coy followed, muttering under his breath until he realized someone was missing.

“Roy?” he growled. “Where did that fool go?”

“I’ll grab his and haul ’em out,” Johnny said.

“He ain’t lazy. He can haul his own,” Coy shot back. He stepped outside and returned a moment later with a fistful of Roy’s collar, shoving him into the room. “Get over there and grab your bags, you worthless piece of—”

He never finished.

Roy had frozen, nose to nose with Cassidy. The hate between them felt like a third man in the room.

“Roy,” Cassidy said quietly. “Didn’t know you were riding with Winchester.”

Roy’s mouth twisted. “Why should you?” he said. “I’ll grab my sacks and I’m gone. I didn’t sign on to work with this man.”

Butch stepped in close, voice low. “I loved your sister with everything I had.”

Roy’s eyes went flat. “She’s dead. That’s on you. Now move, or I’ll show you how much I got left in this black heart.”

Cassidy held his stare, then shifted aside. Roy brushed past, shoulder slamming into Butch on purpose. Cassidy started to go for him, but Coy caught his arm, a quiet anchor in the storm.

Outside, Elzy called, a little sharper, “Ten!”

In minutes, the horses were loaded, empty ones roped and ready. Men swung into saddles, eyes on the dark tree line and the paling sky.

Sundance came around the corner at a run, empty-handed, chest heaving.

“There was no payroll,” he said. “Safe’s clean. Nothing. We were set up.”

Cassidy’s gaze locked on Roy like a gun barrel. The rest of the crew felt the air change.

“We don’t have time for this,” Sundance snapped. “We’ve burned near ten already.”

“When we’re back on the trail,” Cassidy said, voice flat, “you and I have business.”

“Let’s take care of it now,” Roy shouted, swinging down from his horse. Gravel sprayed under his boots.

Cassidy hit the ground just as fast. They crashed together, fists flying. Men glanced from the fight to the trail, to the mine, to the faint glow in the east.

“Knock it off!” someone hissed. “We gotta ride!”

Everything slid into slow motion. Butch and Roy traded heavy blows, grunting, cursing under their breath. Sundance shoved one back, then the other, but they came together again like magnets. The others circled, trying to shout them down without drawing the attention of any wandering guard.

Elzy’s voice cut across the yard again. “Fifteen!”

The sound of the gunshot tore the air in half.

For a heartbeat, no one moved. No one had seen who fired.

Then Grizzly’s horse reared, shrieking, and Hawkins toppled from the saddle like a cut rope, hitting the ground hard and not moving at all.

“Who the heck—?” Johnny started.

Another shot cracked. Carver flew backward off his horse, landing in the dust with his arms splayed wide.

“Every one of you freeze!” a voice barked from the darkness beyond the office. “Toss your guns toward us and get off them horses. Slow. You got two men down. I don’t mind puttin’ a b—”

Cassidy ended the speech with a single shot. The man in the dark folded without finishing his sentence.

Everything broke loose.

Guns came out as one. The guards fired from the shadows; the gang wheeled and fired back. For a dozen seconds the yard was nothing but muzzle flashes, shouted curses, and the meaty thud of bullets finding wood, flesh, and stone.

Then it was over. Smoke hung low and bitter.

Eight guards lay scattered on the ground.

Coy and Cassidy turned in a slow circle, checking their own. Coy let out the breath he’d been holding when he saw Johnny still in the saddle and Roy with his smoking gun. Butch’s eyes dropped to the bodies that didn’t move—Hawkins, Carver, and now Kilpatrick.

“What now?” Kid Curry asked, voice tight. “We’re short three men, no payroll, and every guard in the county’s gonna hear about this.”

“We do what we came to do,” Butch said. His tone left no room for argument. “We take what we’ve got, grab the empty horses, and ride. Nothing’s changed but the count.”

He looked over at Coy. “Looks like you and your boys are coming to Hamilton after all.”

The men traded looks over the horse backs and smoke. The same thought sat on all of them: Did Roy plan this? Who else might be bought? How many more bullets waited down the trail?

Hamilton suddenly felt a long way off.

Chapter 8: “Ann Bassett”

Everyone rides in silence, blood splatter and wonder. Sundance looks deep within, “Three men dead and two more ready to kill each other. Hamilton is starting to smell like a grave.”

Coy, Johnny, and Roy stuck together. Coy knew that every one of the Bunch would be gunning for Roy. He didn’t love him, but they had been through several near death experiences. That draws men closer sometimes than blood.

Elzy and George rode between Cassidy, Sundance and Kid. They were nine strong a few days ago and now they are eight and weak.

Cassidy and Roy each pondered on the events that lead them to this point.

Wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his glove, Robert drove another staple into the post and cinched the barbed wire tight. He settled his hat back on his head, gathered the loose strand, and nudged his horse toward the next post. Before he made it halfway, she stepped out from the shade with a dipper in hand.

“Thought you might want some water,” Ann said. “And maybe someone to talk to besides that horse.”

This was the first time he’d managed the courage to say more than yes ma’am and no ma’am around her.

“You look very nice today, Ann,” he said.

“You need to pay attention to the fence more than me, Robert LeRoy Parker,” she answered, but there was a smile tucked in the corner of her mouth.

By the end of the day, they had kissed. By the next, they were all but inseparable. A year later, they were engaged to be married.

Riding high in the Big Horns one afternoon, he reined in beside her and pointed north. “Come to Montana with me,” he said. “You’ve never been there. We’ll see new country together.”

She lit up at once. “Montana? Of course I want to go. When do we leave?”

“Out of the question,” said Marston Bassett when they told him.

“Dad, please. I’ve never been to Montana.” Ann turned to her mother. “Mom, please help me.”

Her mother glanced between them. “Dear, Robert is a hard worker and a good hand. He’s been one of your best hands.”

“He is all of that,” Marston said, “but my baby is not riding four hundred miles away from us, out of my protection. Too many things can happen between here and there.”

Roy and Robert walked in together and the room went quiet.

“What did we just interrupt?” Robert asked.

“They were probably planning your and my sister’s wedding,” Roy said.

“Don’t stop on our account,” Robert grinned. “In fact, I’ve got a few suggestions myself.”

Marston shook his head. “No, LeRoy. We were just discussing Montana.”

“It’s going to be great,” Robert said. “It’ll only take about a week. We can pretend we’re a married couple heading out to homestead.”

“You can pretend you’re brother and sister traveling,” Marston shot back. “There better not be any homemaking going on.”

“Dad!” Ann yelped.

“Ann, why are you so red, sweetie?” her mother asked, while Robert laughed.

“Well, I’m riding out at first light,” Robert said. “I’d love to have you by my side.”

“She’ll be here when you get back, son,” Marston answered. “It’ll give you something to come home to. Ride fast and hard, get your business done. We’ve got plenty of work waiting on you.”

“That’s not fair,” Ann cried, turning away and storming down the hall to her room.

Marston watched her go, then snorted. “See, Robert? You don’t want to take that moody thing out for a week. You might not come back with her.”

The words were meant light, but they stung all the same.

As Robert finished packing his horse, he was hit from the side by a fierce embrace.

“I was wondering if you were going to see me off,” he said, hugging her back.

“I’m going with you,” Ann said.

“Ann, I can’t go against your father. I work for him,” Robert argued.

“He’s going to be your father-in-law soon enough,” she shot back. “You’re going to be the man of the house. He’ll just have to get over it.”

He searched her face and realized he wasn’t going to talk her out of it. With a quiet curse under his breath, he swung into the saddle. She did the same. Together they turned their horses toward the border and rode.

Marston woke to the wrong kind of quiet. Ann’s bed was empty. Her riding clothes were gone.

He blew into Roy’s room like a storm. “Get up,” he snapped. “Your sister’s gone. You leave now, and you don’t come back without her.”

Thirty minutes later Roy was riding the same trail Robert and Ann had taken, pushing his horse hard. Two days on, near dusk, he spotted the orange flicker of a campfire a hundred yards ahead.

He rode in with his shoulders squared and his jaw set. Ann and Robert looked up from the fire.

“Grab your things, Ann. I’m here to take you home,” Roy said.

“I’m not going anywhere but with Robert,” Ann replied. “He has a job to do up near Bitterroot, and then we’ll come home.”

“Dad told me I couldn’t come back unless you were with me,” Roy shot back.

“Then ride with us,” Robert said. “I could use your help. You’re already here.”

Roy hesitated, looking from his sister’s stubborn eyes to Robert’s steady gaze, then to the dark trail ahead.

Riding into Bitterroot, Robert felt the town’s eyes weigh them. Freight wagons clogged the street, mules bawled, and two saloons spilled music and laughter into the dust. Ann took it all in with bright eyes; Roy watched the men instead.

“Lively place,” Ann said.

“Lively and mean,” Roy muttered.

A man in a sweat-stained hat stepped off a boardwalk, squinted, then grinned wide.

“Well, I’ll be damned. If it ain’t Butch Cassidy.”

Ann’s smile faltered. Roy turned in the saddle, slow.

“Butch who?” he asked.

Robert didn’t answer right away. The pause said enough.

The man slapped Robert on the arm. “Don’t play dumb. You ain’t gone by ‘Robert’ up here in a long time. Folks know you as Butch Cassidy.”

Ann looked from the man to Robert. “What is he talking about?” she asked.

Robert kept his eyes on the street ahead. “Just a name,” he said. “Nothing that changes who I am to you.”

“To me you said your name was Robert LeRoy Parker,” Roy said. “How many names you got?”

Robert finally met his gaze. “Enough to get by.”

That night, over a rough table behind the livery, Robert laid it out.

“Simple job,” he said. “We move a string of horses up-canyon, hand ’em over, get paid. One night’s work.”

Roy eyed the crude map. “Whose horses?”

“Our employer’s,” Robert said.

“Whose brand is on ’em?” Roy pressed.

Robert’s jaw tightened. “Brand don’t always tell the truth, Roy. You want to argue brands, or you want to ride for real money for once?”

Ann slipped her hand into Robert’s. “It’s one job,” she said to Roy. “Then we go home.”

Roy saw the look in her eyes and knew he was outvoted—for now.

The herd moved like a river of hide and muscle through the dark timber, breath steaming in the cold air. Robert rode point with the buyer’s instructions fixed in his mind, cutting a narrow line along the base of the ridge where the moonlight barely reached. Ann and Roy worked the flanks, swinging wide to turn back any horse that thought about breaking for higher ground. It wasn’t their first time handling stock, but this was different—these animals were too well-bred and too nervous not to be “hot.” Every time a shoe struck a stone or a bit jingled too loud, Roy glanced over his shoulder, half expecting lanterns on the horizon.

Hours later, they eased the string into a box canyon choked with shadow and scrub. Three men stepped out from the rocks, hats low, rifles easy in their hands. No one used names, but the way they looked at Robert said they recognized Butch more than the horses. One man counted heads while another handed over a canvas sack that clinked with coin. The exchange was quick, businesslike, and cold. As they rode away with their pay, Ann’s hand found Robert’s on the reins, excitement shining in her eyes; Roy kept his face hard, feeling the weight of the money in Robert’s saddlebag and the weight of what they’d just done settle even heavier on his shoulders.

Roy rode a half-length ahead, shoulders tight, his hat pulled low against the wind knifing down the pass. Behind him, Robert—Butch to half of Montana now—kept pace, the coin from the job thudding dully in his saddlebag. Ann trailed close, trying to bridge the space between them with small talk that died in the cold air.

“So that’s it?” Roy finally said. “We just pretend you’re still some hired hand from Fremont County? Like folks up there weren’t calling you Butch Cassidy right to your face?”

Robert’s jaw worked. “Names don’t matter. What I do for you and Ann does.”

“What you do is drag her into a world where men carry wanted posters with your name on them,” Roy shot back. “Dad didn’t send me to bring her home so you could turn her into an outlaw’s widow before she even gets married.”

Ann tried to cut in—“Roy, that’s enough”—but they were both talking over her now. The trail narrowed, the rock walls closing in, and none of them were really watching anything but each other.

The canyon pinched down into a place locals called the Grim Veil, where the cliffs leaned together and crooked pines clung to the rock like fingers. Robert felt the hair rise on the back of his neck; it was the sort of ground he himself would have chosen for an ambush.

“Keep tight,” he said. “No stragglers. We’re not stopping till we’re through.”

Roy snorted. “Now you’re worried about trouble? After you marched her into Bitterroot with a target on your back?”

They were still at it when the first rope dropped.

It snapped around Ann’s shoulders and yanked her clean out of the saddle before either man finished his next word. Her horse screamed and bolted; she hit the ground, dragged once, and then was gone into the shadows above the trail. Two more figures burst from the rocks—one slammed into Roy’s knee, spinning his horse; the other fired a shot that sent Robert’s mount rearing.

For a few heartbeats it was chaos—hooves, shouts, a glimpse of Ann’s boot vanishing over a ledge. Roy got one wild shot off at a shadow on the rim. Robert scrambled for footing and a clear line, but the attackers melted back into the rock as quickly as they’d come, taking Ann with them.

Silence flooded back into the canyon, broken only by the rattle of loose stones.

“ANN!” Roy’s voice tore at the walls, echoing back at them.

They searched until their horses were spent and the light died—up every goat path, into every crack that might hide a camp. They found nothing but scuffed rock and a single ribbon torn from her dress, snagged on a thorn.

When dawn finally bled into the sky, Roy sat his horse like a man carved from it, eyes hollow. “We can’t leave her,” he said.

Robert stared at the empty ridges of the Grim Veil, knowing the truth every outlaw knew: whoever had taken Ann had all of Wyoming to vanish into, and the trail would be cold before they found the first real sign. “If we die here,” he said quietly, “nobody even knows to come looking.”

Roy turned on him, hatred raw. “She’s gone because of you.”

In the end they rode out of the Grim Veil together, two men on two tired horses, with a third saddle hanging empty between them. Ann was lost, and neither of them would ever forgive the other for how it happened.

Chapter 9: “Ten Years Between Us”

“Billings has the rails and the men who know what to do with concentrate,” Cassidy said. “We get paid there, the smelters never even have to know our names. Then we ride to Hamilton light.”

“I know a man works the rails. Name’s Jones,” Coy put in. “He’ll give us the best rate—unless anyone’s got a better idea.”

“I’ve never done concentrate business in these parts,” Cassidy said. “He sounds as good as any.”

They rode into Billings around one in the afternoon. The town boiled with wagons, rail noise, and people.

“This is perfect, boys,” Butch said. “So much going on, nobody’ll look twice at us.”

“Jones working today?” Coy asked a yard hand down by the freight sheds.

“Yeah, he’s up in the office finishing paperwork. Who should I say is asking?”

“Winchester. I’ve got some concentrate I want him to look at.”

The man trotted off and came back five minutes later with Jones on his heels.

“Coy Winchester! Been a long time. How you been?” Jones called.

“We don’t have time for pleasantries—we’re here for business,” Cassidy cut in.

“Well, all right then,” Jones said, holding up his hands. “What do you have?”

“Twenty-two sacks of concentrate,” Coy said. “Silver-gold, with lead and copper mostly. Not a hundred percent sure.”

“Let’s get ’em in and weighed,” Jones said. “We’ll pull a few samples, see what you’ve got. I’ll have you boys paid and gone in under an hour.”

“Sounds great. We’ll unload and help you load,” Coy replied.

They had the sacks off the horses, onto the platform scale, and sampled in under twenty minutes. Jones used two helpers to slit several bags, scoop mixed samples, and jot figures in his book. By a quarter to two, he was standing at the counter with the till open.

“Eighteen hundred dollars, gentlemen,” he said, counting out the bills. “Not a bad haul, if I say so myself.”

They thanked him, split the money, and by the time the depot clock struck two they were already riding north, lighter by twenty-two sacks and heavier by a small fortune, with Hamilton dead ahead.

“We’re about two weeks from Hamilton, boys,” Butch barked. “I’d like to make it in ten days—if nobody’s got any arguments.”

Silence met him. He took it as a yes, and they rode on.

That night, after a hard day’s ride, they made camp. The men ate well and sat around the fire with tin cups in their hands, faces orange in the glow. Roy didn’t wait for permission.

“Fellas,” he started, “we’re about nine days from Bitterroot country. You know what’s waiting for us there, don’t you?”

“Don’t think anyone wants to hear from you,” Cassidy cut in.

“I do,” Sundance said. “I love a good ghost story.”

“This ain’t a ghost story,” Roy snapped. “This one’s real.”

He let the fire crackle a moment.

“Ten years ago next month, three riders were headed across a long, lonely stretch up that way. They’d just finished a cattle-rustlin’ job and were riding home to…” He paused, eyes on Butch. “Dubois, I believe.”

Cassidy stared back at him, no love in it, daring him to go on.

“Two of those men got to arguing over something small,” Roy continued. “While they were busy jawin’, the third rider got taken. Rope dropped outta nowhere, yanked ’em clean off their horse. The other two pulled up in horror and went charging into the dark after ’em. No matter how hard they rode, they couldn’t catch the hollow men that took their friend. That rider was gone for good. Each man blamed the other. No answers. No body. Just a hole where that person used to be.

“They split over it,” Roy went on, voice low. “Couldn’t stand to look at each other. But fate brought ’em back together. Brought ’em together so vengeance could be paid—in the middle of another job, just like this one. One man put a bullet right between the other one’s eyes, ended a life of misery and regret. And that man?” Roy gave a thin smile. “He was rewarded for doing what needed doing. Lived happily ever after.”

“Funny,” Butch said, “I heard that story too. Except the man you think gets peace ends up shot to pieces.”

“I’d like to see that happen,” Roy growled.

“It can be arranged.”

“What the heck are you two jawin’ about?” Sundance broke in, looking from one to the other. “Knock it off. We’ve got nine hard days ahead. No sense in making ’em any harder.”

Chapter 10: “The Price of Brook Mine”

The next day was harder. After the night’s fire, tension rode every saddle. It seemed every man tried to keep two riders between Butch and Roy. They’d already lost too many; they couldn’t afford to lose another. Roy, sour and restless, sidled up to the group and started trying to turn them against Cassidy. It was no use. Butch was too good a man, and Roy—nobody knew him, and most didn’t care for him. If Butch put an end to Roy right then and there, none of them would protest. Seven could make it to Hamilton just fine—and if they needed more, there’d be settlements ahead where they could pick up another gun.

Three hundred miles on, meanwhile, Hamilton was feeling the strain. Patrons from the night before wondered about the three strangers, now vanished. Word spread that “Rafe,” one of the infamous Veil, had been seen talking with two men. Tensions flared.

“Sheriff, we don’t want the Veil’s business in Hamilton,” Ferguson said. “We do what they ask so they’ll stay on their side. Live and let live, that’s how we survive here.”

“Now Ferg,” the sheriff said, calm, “no one’s in danger. The Veil just had business with those men. None of our folk were touched, nothing for you to worry about. They come to town for supplies and business, and that’s all. I promised Malachar we would not interfere.”

“I wish we could just end this madness once for all,” Cooter spit. “We have the numbers. We could ride out, wipe ’em from the earth. Then Hamilton could finally grow, maybe even welcome strangers for once instead of sending them out the Veil trail.”

“Cooter, stop right there.” The sheriff’s voice turned iron. “You remember Jesse, don’t you? He had the same crazy fire, gathered forty men, and rode that trail proud as hell. None came back. Not one—except Malachar, who rode in with the thumbs and big toes of Jesse’s whole crew. Told me we could give ’em a ‘proper burial.’ Then he said, ‘Donally, my knife’s sharp if you want to send more.’ Rode right back out. We haven’t spoken of nonsense like that since, and I don’t plan on starting now. Understood?”

Cooter’s bravado faded. “Yeah, sheriff.”

Kid rode up alongside Cassidy, eyes narrowed against the glare.

“I’ve been lookin’ behind us for the last few miles,” he said. “There’s movement back there. Looks like twenty riders, maybe more. They’re not out for a Sunday ride—they’ve got business. I figure it’s with us.”

“All right,” Cassidy said. “Keep your eyes on ’em. Let me know when we drop out of sight. I’ll be lookin’ for a place ahead where we can dig in and meet ’em on our terms.”

“Will do.” Kid peeled off and drifted back toward the rear.

Butch glanced over at Sundance. “You hear what Kid said?”

“Yeah, I heard,” Sundance replied.

“Keep your eyes peeled for a spot that gives us the edge.”

“You got it.” Sundance squinted up trail. “Speakin’ of—you see what I see?”

Cassidy followed his gaze. A wrecked stagecoach lay on its side just off the trail, wheels splintered, box half in a wash.

“Yes, I do. All right, boys, follow me!” Butch called. “We’re gonna tuck in behind that turned-over stage up ahead. We’ve got an angry bunch about ten minutes behind us. Let’s end their thoughts of payback before they even get started.”

It took just five minutes for the Wild Bunch to get into position behind the overturned stage. They had maybe five more before the posse was on them. Cassidy barked final orders in a low voice: “Stay sharp, men. There’s twenty riders. Each of us takes three—quick and clean. They’ve got the numbers, but we own the ground.”

Kid, crouched at the edge of the wreck, hissed, “Here they come!” as the riders crested the rise.

As the posse charged down, shots cracked through the cold air. The Wild Bunch gang fired from cover, rifles braced on the splintered wheels and shattered box. Their attackers had nowhere to hide—a dozen fell in the first volley, horses screaming as their riders hit the dust. The rest fired back wild, but the stagecoach held.

Within minutes, seventeen of the twenty-two lay scattered in the sagebrush. The five survivors wheeled and broke for Ranchester, spurs flying, their courage spent. Cassidy’s men checked their casualties—none lost, though one horse was dead and a few jackets showed new holes.

The crew wasted no time. Saddles were cinched, rifles checked, bullet pouches snapped shut. Elzy stood over his dead horse, jaw tight.

Cassidy rode over, rope already in hand. He picked out a bay from the fallen, lassoed it easy, and led it over.

“Mount up, Elzy,” Butch said. “We still got a trail to ride.”

Elzy took the reins without a word and swung up. In less than five minutes, the gang was back in formation, dust already rising behind them as they pressed on for Hamilton—one less horse, but not a step slower.

Chapter 11: “Welcome to the Brotherhood”

Hamilton looked as somber as ever as three members of the Veil rode in. They had business at the general store. As the men strode, no one looked in their direction. As they dismounted Cooter could be heard yelling. He was loading grain in the back of Bart’s wagon. Bart came out of the mill office, “Shut up Cooter. You want them coming over here?”

“Yes I do. The town is yellow. But I’m not. As soon as I get this wagon finished, I am going to finish this once and for all.” In two strides, Aaron had a hold of the back of Cooter’s shirt and escorted him back into the mill. Fred came out and finished Bart’s order.

The door to the store opened with a ding from the bell that hung above announcing every time a patron entered.

“Good morning gentlemen, How may I help you?” asked Mr. Olsen, store owner for over twenty years.

“Our usual order. Two sacks of beans, a sack of flour, ten pounds of bacon, coffee, sugar, and salt and a coil of good rope.” The other guys laughed over that request.

“Horseshoe nails, four shoes in this size, some liniment, and a couple of plugs of tobacco.”

“Give me ten minutes and I’ll have your stuff together,” Olsen said. “Feel free to look around.”

“Like we needed permission,” Silas scowled.

The bell over the door jingled. The door flew open just as Olsen stepped through the doorway into the supply room.

The three mill men found themselves staring down the barrel of a Peacemaker .44-40.

Out at the mill, Aaron went to check on Cooter and found his spot empty. “Cooter! Cooter!” he shouted, looking around. “Any of you fellas seen him?”

“I saw him head out the back of the mill soon as he came in,” Luke said. “Looked like a man on a mission.”

“Oh, shoot,” Aaron muttered. “Drop what you’re doin’, boys. We gotta get to the store—now.”

Back in Olsen’s, Lester slowly raised his hands. “You’re makin’ a stupid mistake, boy,” he said, eyes on Cooter’s gun. While he talked, Silas inched sideways around the hard candy barrel.

“Don’t even think about it,” Cooter snapped, catching the movement. “Get back over there with your friends.”

Silas eased back toward the others. Cooter took his eyes off Lester just a second to make sure—and in that second he realized the third man was gone.

He spun.

Carl came out of the side aisle with a hatchet already in motion. Cooter dropped, the blade whistling over his head and cracking into a shelf. Cooter fired from his knees, the gun going off almost under Carl's chin. The blast blew him backward, but he didn't fall. The other two Veil men crashed into Cooter and drove him to the floor.

They pinned his arms. Silas ripped a bowie knife from his belt and raised it.

The bell over the door rang again. Boots thundered on the floorboards as Aaron and the mill hands rushed in, shouting.

Silas hesitated, just for a heartbeat.

It was enough. Cooter smashed an elbow into Lester's ribs and twisted free, shoving Lester onto his back. Silas spun toward them, saw Lester down and Cooter coming up, and yanked the hatchet from the shelf.

He brought it down with both hands. The blade buried deep in the back of Cooter's skull. Cooter hit the floor and didn't move.

Lester managed to scramble away, only to be grabbed and held by the mill workers. Aaron slammed Silas up against the counter and wrestled the hatchet out of his grip, leaving it stuck in his dead friend's head.

Olsen came out of the back room then, arms full of supplies, stopping dead at the sight. "What in blazes are you all doing? Let 'em go! Are you crazy?"

Aaron didn't look at him. "We were just leaving, Mr. Olsen."

They hauled Silas and Lester out into the street. The gunshot had already drawn a crowd—faces in windows, people gathering in the dust. Sheriff Donally pushed through to the front.

"You men need to let them go," Donally said.

"Sheriff, we're just bringing 'em out of the store," Aaron replied. "We're lettin' them go."

Silas and Lester turned to face the mill crew. Lester's hand flashed—he drew a machete and, in one smooth swing, took the head off the nearest mill worker. Silas snatched up the reclaimed hatchet and waded into the rest. Screams cut short; steel rose and fell. In moments, the mill hands lay in pieces on the street. Only Aaron was left standing, frozen.

Lester and Silas turned toward Sheriff Donally. The townsfolk stood in shocked silence.

"Big mistake today," Silas said calmly. "I thought you had this town under control. Do we need to send a replacement for you?"

"No, sir," Donally said. His voice shook. "I'm in charge of this town."

"Prove it." Silas pointed the hatchet at Aaron. "Kill that man."

“Wait,” Donally stammered. “There… there has to be another way.”

Silas shrugged. “All right. I kill him, Lester kills you, and Hamilton loses its sheriff. Then we send Rafe to run things for a while, till we find someone new. Your choice.”

Donally’s hand trembled on his Colt. He looked at Aaron, at the blood in the dust, at the faces of his townsfolk.

He pulled the trigger.

Aaron staggered back a few steps and crumpled.

“Right decision,” Silas said. “Now have some of these nice people go in and fetch our things. Load ’em in our wagon.”

He looked over the crowd. “Since we’re down a man, Sheriff, you’re going to choose a new one for us to take.”

Every gaze dropped to the ground. Boots shifted. No one dared move.

“Simmons,” Donally said at last. “Take Simmons.”

Simmons looked up without a word. His eyes said everything.

Silas smiled. “Welcome to the Brotherhood.”

Chapter 12: “No Honor Among Theives”

Butch Cassidy couldn’t shake the feeling that everything was connected—Dusty at the Hole, the three dead in Ranchester, and now Elzy’s horse turning up dead. Coincidence didn’t sit right with him. He caught Sundance’s eye and motioned him over.

After Cassidy laid out the facts, the two kicked it around for a bit.

“Ain’t no way it’s coincidence,” Sundance said. “I’ve had a bad feeling about Coy and his men since they threw in with us back in Buffalo, but I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

“At the campout tonight, we’re getting some answers,” Butch replied.

They rode hard the rest of the way and made camp near Skalkaho Falls, twenty miles from their destination. Butch knew this would be the last night before the big score he had in mind for his men.

When George finished the evening meal, he called the men up to get plates. Cassidy and Sundance slipped into line on either side of Roy. Exhausted from the ride, Roy never saw it coming.

As he reached for his plate, Cassidy eased his revolver into Roy’s ribs.
“Don’t make a sound. We just want to talk. Follow Sundance, and everything’ll be fine,” he whispered.

The three men headed down an incline to a clearing, out of earshot of the others. As soon as Roy stepped into the open, he bolted. He was halfway down the ravine when Butch fired, knocking Roy’s hat clean off.

“Next one’ll give you a limp for the rest of your worthless life!” Butch shouted.

Roy froze and climbed back toward them. The rest of the men, hearing the shot, were already closing in.

“So much for keeping this quiet,” Butch growled. “Let’s all get back to the fire.”

When everyone settled, Roy asked, “Can I at least eat first?”

“When you talk, you eat,” Sundance barked.

Roy hesitated, then folded. “All right.”

The first questions were about Dusty, and Roy gave it up. “Dusty, Kilpatrick, and I were fixing to take you out in Hamilton. There’s a sheriff up there—Donally.”

“Branch Donally?” Kid Curry asked.

“Yeah. He’s got a cousin in Buffalo I talked to about the plan. The sheriff’s riding there now to fill him in.”

“What about Ranchester?” Butch asked.

“That was to thin the herd,” Roy admitted. “Make sure you’d have to let me come to Hamilton.”

Elzy snorted. “Dang, maybe we oughta let Roy plan our jobs, Butch. Fella’s got a knack.”

“Shut your pie hole,” Cassidy snapped. “We lost good men. Friends.”

“Sorry, Butch.”

“So what’s the plan for Hamilton?” Butch pressed.

Roy smirked. “You’ll have to wait and see—”

A yell tore from his throat as he dropped to one knee.
“You shot me!”

“Yeah, I did,” Cassidy said coldly. “Now keep talking.”

“I was gonna tell you—but not now!”

“We’ll see about that.” Butch leveled the revolver again.

Another shot. Another scream.

“You shot me again, you sorry—”

“Your leg’s big enough for the rest of the rounds,” Butch cut him off.

“Okay, okay! I’ll talk—just patch me up, I’m bleeding bad.”

“When you’re done talking.”

“I’m gonna bleed out!”

“Then talk fast.”

Roy glared up at him. “Butch Cassidy... or should I call you Robert LeRoy Parker?”

“You can call me Butch.”

Roy sneered. “Sheriff Donally’s tied in with the Veil. When we get to Hamilton, he’s gonna arrest us all—then hand you over to the Brotherhood.”

Coy gasped. “You outta your damned mind? The Veil’ll kill us all! You don’t make deals with them.”

“You do when you’re desperate,” Roy said. “I’ve been planning this ten years, Robert.”

“You use that name again and it’ll be your last,” Butch warned.

“My bad, Butch,” Roy said, grinning through the pain. “You killed my sister Ann. My dad went after her nine years ago, and they killed him, too. Mom hung herself a month later. So, Butch... now it’s your turn.”

“Well, wasn’t that easy,” Cassidy said. “Thank you, Roy. We’re heading to Hamilton to end all of this.”

“Hold on, Butch,” Elzy protested. “You ain’t seriously goin’ up against the Brotherhood.”

“Then leave,” Butch snapped. “Any of you can. But the rest of us—we finish what we started.”

The camp fell quiet. One by one, the men nodded. Hamilton awaited.

Chapter 13: “A New Sheriff in Town”

“This chili’s the best I’ve had in a month, Sherry,” the sheriff said, glancing at the dessert menu.

Grady burst through the door. “Sheriff, we need you outside—now!”

“Grady, I’m ordering pie. Can’t it wait?”

“No. It’s bad.”

“Okay, Sherry, hold my spot. I’ll be right back.”

Donally hadn’t even stepped fully off the porch when the sight hit him like a sledgehammer. What in the world is he doing here?

“Hello, Sheriff,” Rafe called.

“Hello, Rafe. What brings you to our fine little town?”

“Well, the answer to that, Sheriff—” Rafe started pleasant, then his voice rose “—is you! You messed up, Donally, and Malachar’s sent me to fix it.”

“There’s no problem here. We sent a peace offering for the pickup fiasco the other day.”

“It should never have happened. That’s the problem.” Rafe stepped closer. “You’re losing your grip on this town, Donally. I’m here to take it back. So gather my citizens, will you? I’ll be in *my* office, Deputy Donally. Oh, I like the sound of that.”

Donally turned on his heel and went back inside.

“Sheriff, that was quick,” Sherry said. “Slice of pie?”

“No, thanks. Just letting you know you’re closed for the day.”

“What do you mean, closed?”

“You’re closed. Name’s Deputy Donally now.”

He didn’t need to say more. She knew what that meant. Rafe was back.

After everyone gathered, Donally entered Rafe’s office.

“Thank you, Deputy,” Rafe said. “Before you go, I believe you’ve got something of mine.”

Donally frowned. “The badge?”

“Exactly.”

He slid it across the desk. Rafe pinned it on with a smug grin and stepped outside.

“So thankful you all could gather in spite of your busy schedules,” he said to the crowd, arms wide. The townsfolk chuckled nervously. They were here to appease him—the man and the Brotherhood behind him.

“Now, let’s welcome our new deputy: Branch Donally!”

Applause rippled through puzzled faces. The old-timers didn’t need to ask who the new sheriff was. They remembered Rafe—the one who’d replaced Sheriff Walt years ago. When Walt was stripped of his badge, it took three awful months before Donally arrived, a Pinkerton man sent west to hunt Cassidy and the Wild Bunch. But like so many before him, Hamilton had changed him.

“Alright, folks,” Rafe continued. “First, you’ll all turn in your weapons to Deputy Donally. Anyone refusing gets a trip to Bitterroot Valley; anyone caught with one after that—public execution.

“Next—curfew’s nine o’clock starting tonight. Break it once, you’re beaten. Twice, you’re executed.

“Last, no one leaves town until I say. Out-of-town business goes through my office. Any questions? No? Good.”

He rattled off assignments—visitor check-ins, Monday meetings, new deputies chosen on the spot. As he finished, a lone rider entered town.

“Well, would you look at that,” Rafe said. “First visitor already. Guess me takin’ charge is payin’ off.”

Donally froze the moment he saw the rider. Collon.

“Welcome to Hamilton,” Rafe called. “What brings you here, stranger?”

“My cousin’s the sheriff,” Collon said. “Maybe you’ve heard of him—Donally.”

“You mean my deputy,” Rafe corrected. “I’m Sheriff Rafe now.”

Donally forced a brittle smile. “Yeah, Collon. You remember—I’m deputy now.”

“Oh. Right,” Collon said, reading Donally’s warning glance. Don’t. Say. A word.

That night, Collon slipped to Donally’s quarters.

“Cassidy and his boys are coming,” he whispered. “Gold shipment. They’re expecting you to hand Butch over to the Veil.”

“There aren’t any shipments for two months,” Donally said, frowning.

“They’re coming anyway. Roy Bassett’s setting it up.”

“That plan’s dead,” Donally muttered. “Not with Rafe running things. You’ve got to ride out—warn Cassidy. Spin a story if you have to, but keep ’em away from here.”

Collon saddled up before curfew and was nearly past the town sign when two armed men stepped into the road.

“What’s this?” Collon asked, trying to sound calm.

“You broke rule number two,” the tall one said. “And you were fixin’ to break number three.”

“Curfew?” Collon asked.

“Curfew’s nine. Nobody leaves town, neither,” said the second man.

Collon forced a smile. “Didn’t know. Visitor and all.”

“Turn that horse around,” the taller man said. “Follow Charles to the sheriff’s office.”

Rafe was waiting, legs up on the desk like he’d been born there.

“What’s the trouble, Charles?”

“He broke rule two—was about to break rule three.”

“That so?” Rafe smiled thinly. “Collon, is it?”

“Yes. Just tell me the fine and I’ll pay it. Then I’ll go.”

“Doesn’t work like that. Rule-breakin’ has consequences.”

“What kind?”

“First curfew violation’s a public beating,” Rafe said. “Lucky for you, I never said what happens for rule three. Thought folks were smart enough not to try.”

He stood. “Charles, take him out front. I’ll ring the bell.”

Collon jerked his arm free. “Get your hands off me!”

Rafe’s Colt came up slow and steady. “Easy, son. You’ll live—might not walk right, but you’ll live. We can do it easy or hard.”

Collon cursed them all, fear cracking his voice.

“Get it all out,” Rafe said, laughing. “You won’t feel much like talkin’ in a minute.”

Donally jerked awake to the clang of the bell. “The curfew,” he muttered, heart hammering.

He ran for the square, dread coiling tight.

By the time he reached the crowd, Rafe was grinning like a preacher. “Glad you could join us, Donally. Seems your cousin forgot about curfew. Had to forget, I reckon. You’d never let him ride out otherwise.”

Donally spotted Collon—tied, pale, battered. Shame burned up through him like fire.

“Thank you all for coming to our first official rule-breaking,” Rafe said. “Our guest here thought he’d slip out toward Bitterroot. Lucky Charles stopped him.”

Rafe’s grin faded to something colder. “Charles, you caught him—you get the honor.”

Charles stepped forward and smashed a fist into Collon’s face. The crowd gasped. Collon hit the dirt, sputtering.

John’s boot landed next, then Tim’s knee. Dust rose, and Collon’s screams tore through the night until they broke down to hoarse moans.

“Stop!” Donally shouted. “That’s enough!”

Rafe didn’t even turn. “You want to finish for him, Deputy? Payment’s payment.”

Donally froze, tears cutting down his face. He’d done this—his blood. His own blood.

Rafe fired a shot in the air. “Enough!”

Silence thudded down on the square. Collon lay crumpled, ribs heaving, blood painting his shirt.

“Alright, Donally,” Rafe said cheerfully. “Come get your cousin and haul him home. The rest of you—five minutes to get inside before you break curfew yourselves.”

As the crowd scattered, Rafe leaned close. “Best hurry. I don’t reckon he’s got another beating in him.”

Donally knelt. Collon flinched, then softened when he saw him.

“I’m sorry,” Donally whispered. “I’m so damn sorry.”

Collon tried to speak but only managed a strangled wheeze. Donally slipped an arm under him, each step home feeling like a sentence he’d written himself.

Chapter 14: “Curfew and Consequences”

The Bunch, crouched low in the brush, all turned to look at one another as they watched Hamilton tear itself apart.

“What the heck was that all about?” Sundance whispered.

“Oh no,” Roy breathed.
Every head snapped his way.
“That’s Rafe Donner,” Roy said. “He’s Brotherhood.”

“I thought Branch Donally was the sheriff,” George muttered.

“He is. Was. I don’t know,” Roy said, panic edging his voice. “This is all wrong.”

“No it ain’t,” Cassidy said. “It’s perfect.” He smiled slowly. “I got an idea.”

Rafe leaned back in the sheriff’s chair and let the weight of the badge settle on his chest. It felt good. Better than riding second to Malachar, better than taking orders in the dark. Here, people jumped when he spoke.

He shifted, and a sharp spike of pain shot up from his hip. The memory came with it—the last time he crossed Grayveil and paid in bone.
“I didn’t mean it, Malachar,” he muttered into the empty office. “Just jawin’, is all.”

An hour later, Rafe was slumped in the chair, snoring softly, boots up on the desk. Outside, Hamilton lay quiet under his new rules. Lamps were out. Doors were barred. Donally and three borrowed men watched the only two proper roads in and out, rifles in hand.

They thought that was enough.

Out past the lamplight, where the dirt track bled into brush and shadow, Cassidy and his Bunch were already moving. They weren’t coming in like outlaws.

Tonight, they were coming in polite.

Donally came out in the opening as the men rode up.

“Hold it right there, boys,” Donally called. “We’ve got a strict curfew in this town. You fellas are gonna have to come back at sunup.”

“Can’t,” Coy said. “We’ve got word on Cassidy and his gang. They’re a day behind us—plannin’ a gold heist.”

Donally straightened, eyes narrowing. “Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch are headin’ for Hamilton?”

“Sure are,” Coy said. “Job lined up, and they aim to take out the sheriff while they’re at it. What’s his name again?”

“Branch Donally,” Roy blurted a little too quick.

“Branch ain’t wearin’ the badge anymore,” Donally said, his jaw tightening. “Rafe Donner’s the sheriff now.”

“Whoever he is, he’s in a world of hurt,” John added. “Cassidy’s got greed and mean in his eyes.”

“Alright, boys,” Donally said. “You ride in with me. We’ll lay this out for the sheriff and see what he wants to do.”

He saddled up, leading the group into town. They rode in silence, the night heavy with dust and unease.

Donally shoved through the office door; it slammed against the wall with a crack.

Rafe jerked awake, gun already in his hand. The shot went off wild, whistling past John’s ear and biting deep into the wood of the frame.

The men dove for cover as one.

“Sheriff! It’s me—Donally!”

Rafe cursed under his breath. “What in blue blazes are you doin’ stormin’ into my office in the middle of the damned night? You just broke curfew yourself. Now I gotta drag the whole town outta bed.”

“Sheriff, hold on,” Donally said. “These men just rode in. I stopped ’em and questioned ’em. They say Butch Cassidy’s a day out—comin’ to hit a gold shipment and go after the law in this town.”

“Well, gentlemen, place your guns on the table and have a seat,” Rafe said. “We’ve got ourselves a whole lot to talk about.”

Just before first light, Cassidy, Dance, and Kid slid into Hamilton like shadows. They kept to the alleys and dark corners, watching the town sleep under Rafe’s new rules.

The last part of the plan was in motion.

Chapter 15: “Grave Anatomy on the Square”

If you didn’t know any better, you’d think it was business as usual in Hamilton. Sherry poured coffee for her regulars at the diner. Fred set up tables and chairs for the poker games that would start in a couple of hours. Joyce, Aaron’s widow, ran the mill now, fighting to keep it alive after what had happened a few days before. At the Bitterroot Inn, Sandra barked orders to the women who’d be cleaning rooms that morning.

Rafe pushed through the door of Hamilton Hardware.
“Sheriff… what can I do for you?” Thomas asked, his voice unsteady.
“Need a few of those rifles you keep in the back,” Rafe said. “We’re plannin’ ourselves a nice, old-fashioned shootout tonight.”

“Evening, Fred,” Rafe said, all easy charm. “I’ll be needing a few of your security boys tonight. And if any new faces wander in here—drinking or lookin’ to try their luck—you let me know first.”

“Will do, Sheriff. Anything else?”

“That’ll do, Fred.”

He crossed the street.

“Morning, Sandra.”

“Sheriff,” she answered, not looking up from her ledger.

“Need a favor, sweetheart,” Rafe went on. “I want the whole upstairs empty tonight. No guests. No exceptions.”

“It’ll be empty,” she said, voice tight.

Rafe smiled and moved on.

“Doctor Huffman,” he said as he stepped into the little office. “Just thought I’d let you know you might want to stay open a bit later than usual.”

The doctor’s brows drew together. “Is the curfew lifted tonight, then?”

“We’ll see, Doc,” Rafe said, a smirk tugging at his mouth. “We’ll see.”

Cassidy, the crew and Donally all met just outside of town.

“Donally, I need you to hear this clear,” Cassidy said. “Coy, John, and Roy ride in with you this afternoon. You bring ’em in like they’re Butch Cassidy and his boys—announce ’em big, make sure Rafe hears every word. Kid Curry, George, Dance—you three take the

upstairs rooms at the inn. Once Rafe thinks he's got Cassidy in his sights, you clean house from above. Street'll be clear for me to step out of the shadows when it counts."

He looked around the circle. "Everybody clear on the plan?"

Donally still wasn't. He ran through each step again, checking every name and position, looking for a way it didn't end in blood. When the last objection died and the last nod came, they broke apart and slipped off to their places.

Donally slipped into the Bitterroot Inn through the back. He caught Sandra's eye and drew her into the little office, shutting the door behind them. A few hushed, shaken minutes later, she nodded once and handed him the spare key.

One by one, the men Rafe had placed upstairs opened their doors to a familiar face and a quiet word. None of them saw the barrel or the blackjack until it was too late. By the time the sun cleared the ridge, Rafe's "riflemen" lay bound and bleeding on the floorboards, and Sundance, the Kid, and George were in their places at the windows. Each man tipped the brim of his hat when Cassidy's shape flickered in the street below.

Donally slipped out the back and mounted up with Coy, John, and Roy.

"Three minutes," he said, snapping his pocket watch shut. "You boys ready?"

They answered with the small, hard nod of men past ready. Donally cinched his strap tight, wrapped his fingers around the reins, and swallowed down the last of his doubt.

"Alright, then," he said. "Let's do it."

He spurred his horse and rode straight for the square.

"Sheriff Rafe! Sheriff Rafe!" Donally bellowed. "Cassidy and his crew are here!"

Rafe stepped out onto the porch of his office, rifle resting easy on his shoulder, a smile already on his face. "Welcome to Hamilton, gentlemen."

Up at the inn, Rafe lifted two fingers, the signal for his men to take aim. Sundance, crouched behind the lace curtain, gave the same signal back.

They're ready, Rafe. Just not for you.

"You boys here for business or pleasure?" Rafe called. The riders said nothing, hats low, dust hanging around them like smoke. "What's the matter? The great Butch Cassidy got no words?"

Coy lifted his head and smiled.

Rafe saw it—the wrong face, the wrong eyes—and the smile slid off his own. He jerked his hand up again, sharper this time, but no rifles answered. When he finally looked to

the inn, George heaved a limp body out the window. It hit the street with a thud that sucked the breath out of the crowd.

Rafe yanked his rifle down, bringing it up on the three in front of him—

—and cold steel kissed the soft of his throat from behind.

“Drop it, Rafe,” Cassidy whispered in his ear.

The rifle slipped from Rafe’s hands and hit the boards.

Cassidy tightened his grip and raised his voice. “Folks of Hamilton!” he called. “Appreciate you comin’ out for the show. Sheriff Rafe here is steppin’ down. Donally’s takin’ the badge back. And Rafe’s ridin’ home to tell the Brotherhood they ain’t welcome in this town no more.”

Rafe laughed, a wet, ugly sound in Cassidy’s ear. “Butch, I ain’t resignin’ from a damn thing,” he growled. “Donally’s a deputy, and I ain’t goin’ anywhere. These people know who owns ’em. You put that knife down, I’ll kill you quick. That’s the only mercy you’re gettin’.”

Cassidy’s hand loosened. He stepped back a half-pace.

“Alright, Sheriff,” he said, voice softening. “You’re right. Don’t know what come over me.” He pulled the blade away.

Rafe turned, hand out, teeth bared. “Give me the knife,” he snarled. “Before I change my mind.”

Cassidy met his eyes and smiled like they shared a joke from years back.

“Here you go.”

He drove the blade straight into Rafe’s heart.

Rafe looked down, stunned, fingers twitching around the hilt sticking out of his chest. His mouth worked soundlessly as red spread across his shirt. He dragged his eyes back up to Cassidy, trying to shape one last clever line.

Cassidy was already moving. A second knife flashed and opened Rafe’s throat in a single, brutal slice.

Rafe dropped to his knees. His hands clawed at Cassidy’s vest, smearing it with blood, but no words came—only a wet rattle and a string of bubbles that popped crimson on his lips. Then his grip slipped, and he folded onto the boards that had heard every threat he’d ever made.

Silence rolled over the square.

Cassidy bent, wiped his knife clean on Rafe’s coat, and straightened. He turned to Donally, then to the crowd.

“Hamilton,” he said, voice carrying to every doorway and window, “looks like you just lost a sheriff.”

He jerked his chin toward Donally.

“Now you get to decide who wears the badge next.”

Chapter 16: “Message on a Brother”

Cinching the last rope, they had Rafe trussed to the hitch rail, upright and helpless.

“Town got a branding rack?” Cassidy asked.

“Back of the blacksmith,” Fred said.

“Good.” Cassidy’s mouth crooked. “Got a message needs sending.”

They dragged Rafe’s horse to the forge. Cassidy slipped inside, scanning the iron rack. He came out with two brands and a look that made men step aside.

“Fire it, Kid.”

The coals roared. Iron turned the color of the sun.

Lines were cast from four corners to the halter. The horse danced, whites showing. Cassidy palmed the first iron, heat humming through the handle, and moved to the animal’s shoulder. He laid a hand on its neck until the trembling steadied, then met the dark eye.

“Carry this to your owner,” he said softly. “Tell Malachar we’re done kneelin’.”

He pressed the iron. The hiss ripped through the square; the smell of burned hair and hide rolled over the men. The horse bucked against the ropes; the lines held.

Cassidy lifted, the iron—the curved C—and set it deep over the GV mark, cutting it in half. The crowd went quiet in a way that felt like a prayer breaking.

“Vent brand,” someone whispered. “He canceled ’em.”

Cassidy stepped back, handed the iron off, and looked at the faces gathered there—fear, shock, a few smiles trying not to be seen.

“You want him, Malachar?” he said to the empty air, to every set of eyes that would carry the tale. “Come take him.”

They walked the horse and rider to the edge of town. When they reached the last scrub pine, Cassidy slowed, laid a hand on the animal’s neck, and spoke a few low words nobody quite caught. Then he stepped back and slapped the horse’s rump. It lunged forward, tearing down the trail toward the Veil, Rafe’s body swaying with each stride.

“Now what, Cas?” Dance asked.

“We wait,” Cassidy said. “Not blind. Smart. I want eyes on every road, every ridge. Nobody comes or goes without us knowin’.”

“You really think he’ll come?” Coy asked.

Cassidy watched the dust where the horse had vanished.

“Oh, he’ll come,” he said. “Only thing we don’t know is if he comes quiet or loud. So we get ready for both.”

The horse made the Veil by noon. Scouts spotted it a mile out—rider listing, smoke-black mark seared into the shoulder. They caught the reins and led it in.

“Malachar!” one of them shouted. “Message for you.”

Malachar stepped from the cave mouth, eyes hard, jaw tight. He despised being pulled from meditation.

“You know the rule about disturbing me,” he said, voice like a whip.

“A horse on the trail, sir,” the scout said. “Rafe’s mount. He’s… gone. And the brand’s been cut.”

“Rafe?” Disbelief flickered, then curdled. “What brand?”

The scout swallowed. “A C stamped over ours. Split it in two.”

Malachar’s mouth twitched into something like a smile. “Cassidy.” He tasted the name. “Good. Sooner than planned, then.”

He turned on his heel. “Saddle up.”

Ten minutes later, fifty riders sat their mounts, rifles slung, faces set. Malachar rode the line, giving orders without raising his voice.

“We go straight in. No speeches. No parley. Hit them hard, hit them fast. No prisoners.” He paused, letting the words sink in. “Cassidy is mine. No one else lays a hand on him.”

“Yes, Malachar,” the men answered together.

He drew his weapon and lifted it, the iron catching the light. “Today,” he hissed, “the name is Mr. Gray.”

Spurs clicked. The column rolled out, dust boiling behind them, the branded horse tied off at the rear like a banner of war.

Cassidy prepared the town for what was to come. Every building was barricaded. Gunmen were in every window. If the Brotherhood came in peacefully, they would offer peace. If they came in for war, war would be given back.

“I don’t reckon it’ll be long now. You feel that fear in your gut? Good. Fear’s welcome—as long as it don’t own you. We ain’t here to run. We’re here to stand. Let that fear sharpen your aim, not shake it. Let it push every shot into the men who’d own this town. You want the Brotherhood gone? Then let that fear help you finish ’em.”

The first sounds of the Veil could be heard just after three. Everyone’s heart stopped for a second. Sweat began to roll down their foreheads. “Steady men!” Cassidy barked out for all to hear. Butch thought in his heart, could this town that had been run over really stand up to the Brotherhood or would they all die here tonight. He grinned finally and thought to himself. We all might meet our maker tonight but we won’t be alone.

As the Veil got within shooting distance they began to do just that. Shots fired in all directions hitting building and windows. Men that were positioned to give fight were being hit and or hitting the floor for cover.

Sundance had the top floor of the inn. His first six shots cracked out the window; two men dropped in the street before the others even knew where the fire was coming from. He worked the lever and the rifle took over, three more riders pitching out of their saddles in quick, ugly jerks.

Across town, Kid Curry leaned out the grain window of the mill. Every time his pistol barked, a Veil rider folded. Horses screamed, men tumbled, and the trail into Hamilton turned into a pile of thrashing bodies and dust.

Down at the diner, George had wedged himself by the front window, guarding Sandra. The first sweep of bullets punched through the glass and frame; one round caught him high in the shoulder and spun him back onto her. Blood poured down his sleeve like someone had opened a spigot.

“Hold still,” Sandra hissed, pressing a rag to the wound.

“Can’t,” he grunted, forcing himself upright to fire again.

The second shot found him clean. His gun slipped from his hand and he collapsed full-weight across her lap. She didn’t have to check; she felt the life go out of him.

At the blacksmith’s, Coy, Roy, and John hunkered behind walls and wagons, watching the street.

“They’ll come this way,” Coy muttered. “Cassidy branded ’em here. They’ll want it back.”

The sound of gunfire rolled closer. A knot of riders tore past, filling the doorway and siding with lead. John jerked first, dropping without a sound. Coy was spun onto his back by a round that took him in the gut.

Roy stayed on his feet. He stepped into the doorway and emptied his gun into the blur of men and horses until the hammer clicked on empty. He got three of them before a bullet picked him up and slammed him face-down into the mud.

When the smoke finally thinned, half the town was burning and bodies lay scattered in the street. Of the fifty men Malachar had brought, maybe fifteen still sat their saddles. On Hamilton's side, only five were left standing: Donally, Sundance, Sandra, Fred, and Cassidy.

The two groups faced each other through heat-shimmer and drifting dust. Malachar swung down from his horse, boots hitting the ground like a verdict.

"I am… very disappointed in you, Donally," he said, voice low and cold. "I truly thought you were smarter than this."

Donally opened his mouth to speak, but Malachar laid a finger across his lips.

"Don't," he said softly. "Let me enjoy this."

A Veil man stepped in behind Donally and drove a blade up under his ribs.

Donally's eyes went wide. He understood it all in a heartbeat—that it hadn't been enough. Malachar caught him as his legs gave way and lowered him to the dirt.

"Sleep easy, old friend," Malachar murmured. "I will miss you."

Sandra screamed. Fred charged the attacker with a roar, got off three strides before a single shot took him in the chest. He hit the ground and didn't move again.

Malachar straightened and turned to Cassidy, a slow smile crawling across his face.

"I'm going to have a fine time breaking you, Butch Cassidy," he said. "Heard about you for years. And this must be your shadow—Sundance. You two'll look real good hanging in my cave."

One of his men jerked a thumb toward Sandra. "What about her?"

Malachar glanced over. "Too old and too mean to bother with. Leave her. Let her run what's left of this place."

Cassidy and Sundance were hauled onto horses, wrists roped, and the column started to move out. A rifle cracked from somewhere down the street; the shot went wild, kicking dust.

"Got another one," a ranger shouted. "Want him dead?"

"Kill him," Malachar said without turning. "We don't need strays."

"Yeah, kill the no-good rat," Cassidy barked. "I've hated him ten years. Do me the favor."

Malachar reined in, eyes narrowing. “If Cassidy doesn’t like him,” he said, “I’m already curious. Bring him. I want to see why he bothers you so much.”

They dragged the wounded man out and tied him to a spare horse. Then the Veil turned their backs on Hamilton and rode for the canyon, dust swallowing them.

Everyone left standing in the street knew it: whatever was coming next would finish this for good—one way or the other.

Chapter 18: “Long Live the Bunch”

As the last cage clanged shut, Malachar and his men stood back, faces lit with genuine triumph. They were to be feared and they knew it.

“Enjoy your new homes,” Malachar said, grinning. “You’re my guests for the next… oh, I don’t know. However long you last.”

A few of the Brotherhood laughed with him; others just watched the captives coldly.

“Now let’s drink till we drop. We earned this.” Malachar slapped two of his men on the back and they drifted toward the firelight and barrels.

In the cages, Roy, Sundance, and Cassidy shoved and pulled at iron bars, testing every weld and joint.

“It’s no use,” a hoarse voice whispered from two cages over. “I’ve tried. We all have. Some of us been here for years. The girl beside me’s been here ten.”

“Ten years?” Sundance breathed.

Roy’s eyes never left Butch. “That’s how long you and I been feudin’, Butch.”

“I’m not ready to give up,” Cassidy said. “There’s a way out. I just have to find it.”

Outside the circle of cages, the Brotherhood’s revelry swelled. More men drifted in from the dark timber, answering Malachar’s shout to join them. By the time the last bottle was uncorked there were hundreds of men around the fires, laughing, drinking, and shouting over one another. The Veil’s numbers were vast. From the cages, they looked unbeatable.

“What’re you gonna do with our new guests?” one man called.

“Break them,” Malachar answered.

“In the usual way?” another shouted.

Malachar laughed. “In the usual way.”

The roar of approval rolled across the camp.

Inside the compound, Cassidy leaned close to the bars. “I’ve got an idea,” he said low. “I’m gonna rock this cage ’til it tips. The floor’s the weak point. These things been sitting in dirt and mud for years. Iron down there’s bound to be rotten.”

He started to shift his weight, throwing himself against one side, then the other. The cage hardly moved. The iron was thick, the frame heavy. Gritting his teeth, Butch hurled his shoulder into the bars again and again. Slowly, the legs began to bite deeper into the soft ground.

“One more,” he gasped, and drove himself into the side with everything he had.

The cage lurched, then went over with a crash, slamming Cassidy onto his shoulder in a spray of dirt.

“Quiet,” he hissed, sucking air. “If that made noise, I don’t want company till I’ve had time to work.”

He pressed his cheek to the cold ground, fingers already feeling along the rusted floor for the first weak seam.

The Brotherhood’s laughter swelled, then cut off as a drum cracked twice by the main fire. Malachar’s voice rose, thick with drink and triumph.

“Bring out the Veil’s ten-year prize,” he called. “Let the new guests see what becomes of those who won’t break.”

Two men came from the dark with a lantern and a ring of keys. They stopped at the cage beside the whispering stranger. Iron squealed. A woman stumbled into the lantern’s halo, blinking against the light. Her hair hung in a rough braid; a leather thong lay dull against her throat.

Roy leaned into his bars. “No,” he said, almost laughing. “No, that’s a trick.”

Butch went still, breath caught high in his chest.

“Up,” one guard snapped, shoving her toward the fire. “Let ’em look.”

The lantern flame tilted—and the locket on the thong flashed gold.

Butch’s hand shot through the bars. “Ann!”

She froze. In the heavy silence, the locket swung and clicked once against the iron.

“Back!” a guard barked, and jammed the lantern hard into Butch’s wrist. He grunted and dropped away. Roy rattled his cage so hard the whole frame rang.

“Malachar said look,” the other guard drawled. “Didn’t say touch.”

Ann turned toward the sound of Butch’s voice, eyes wide, searching the dark. “Robert?” she said, the name raw from ten years of disuse.

Roy made a sound like something tearing. “Ann.”

Malachar laughed, pleased. “Well now. Seems our guests know our ghost.”

He reached out and lifted the locket with one finger. “Pretty trinket. Pretty story. She won’t break for a whip or a winter. Maybe she’ll break for a choice.”

He shoved her back toward the open cage.

“Close it,” he told his men, loud enough for the captives to hear. “Bring her back at dawn. We’ll see who starts screaming first—her, or the men who love her.”

The gate slammed. The keys rattled. Laughter rolled again.

In the dark, Butch pressed his forehead to cold iron, wrist throbbing where the lantern had burned him. Roy’s breath sawed in and out like a man drowning.

“Hold on,” Butch whispered, not sure if he meant her or himself. “Hold on, Ann. I’m coming.”

He knew time wasn’t on his side. He had to think, had to find a way to get himself and every soul in those cages out before the Brotherhood came back. With Malachar’s warning, he knew Ann didn’t have another day in this place. Malachar had to die.

What scared him more was the empty space after that. Rafe gone, Malachar gone—would the Veil break apart, or would some other butcher step into their boots? He didn’t know. All he knew was that if he failed now, Ann would die thinking he’d left her twice, and Roy would never forgive him for either.

He worked the floor of the cage, fingers searching for the spots where rust and time had chewed through the iron. When he found a seam that crumbled under his thumb, he set himself and drove his shoulder into it the way he’d done to tip the cage. The whole frame shuddered. A second blow sent flakes of metal and packed dirt spraying. On the third, the weakened plate gave way with a dull crack, leaving a jagged hole just big enough for a man to crawl through if he didn’t mind bleeding for it.

He only stayed on the ground a few seconds before shoving himself up and crawling to Roy’s cage. Together they rocked it, shoulders slamming in rhythm until the legs finally bit deep and the whole thing rolled onto its side with a muffled thud. Roy set to work on the rusted floor the way Butch had shown him. It took him a few more blows—every strike jarred the wounds in his leg that Butch had given him earlier—but at last a jagged hole yawned wide enough for him to drag himself through.

Cassidy moved fast, tipping Sundance’s cage, then Kid Curry’s. One by one they tore at the rotten iron and squirmed out into the narrow lanes of shadow. Only then did Butch go to Ann. He knew she didn’t have the strength left to fight iron. He eased his weight against her cage, rocking it gently until it went over rather than crashed, then dropped to his knees and reached in. She was light in his arms, too light for the girl he remembered. He cradled her out of the twisted doorway as carefully as if the whole camp might shatter at a single wrong move.

He didn’t want to let her go, but the plan wouldn’t work if he clung to her. He scooped Ann up and carried her to the cave mouth, laying her just out of sight of the Veil’s fires. Then he went back into the dark and brought the others through, one by one. Eleven more captives. With him and Ann, they made thirteen.

“For this to work, I need every one of you,” Cassidy said, voice low but firm. “They’ll be back at dawn. We’ve got no guns, so surprise is all we’ve got. We’re not slipping out of this cave without bein’ seen. We stay put and hit ’em when they come in.”

“My cage floor had iron I could pull loose,” Roy added. “Bet the rest do too. I’d rather meet ’em with a fistful of iron than with empty hands.”

They moved through the tipped cages, feeling for rotten straps and loose plates, prying them free. Rust flaked, metal groaned, but no one complained. When they were done, each man and woman held a length of iron about a foot and a half long, and a shorter piece six to eight inches—a poor man's club and a knife in one.

Kid Curry hefted his, testing the weight. "Not bad, Roy," he said. "Might just give us a chance."

The cave went quiet. Everyone settled into place, clutching their lengths of iron, doing the best they could with what they had. Ann lay off to the side, the weakest of them, where Butch could see her. He'd lost her once; he couldn't bear to lose her again.

Sundance slipped back in from the entrance. "Sun's about to come up," he murmured. "Men outside look half-dead. They drank their victory dry."

Butch's eyes narrowed. "Then maybe we don't wait for 'em to come to us."

He looked around at the faces in the dark.

"If they're all laid out, we hit 'em out there," he said. "We come out screaming and swinging—give 'em no time to think. We kill enough to break through and run. Don't get picky about who you hit, just keep moving… but Malachar's mine."

"Kid, I need you to do something for me," Cassidy said.

"Anything," Kid replied.

"Sneak out. Tell me what we're lookin' at."

Kid slipped out into the faint gray. The sun hadn't cleared the trees yet; the camp lay in a low wash of cold light. He moved between sprawled bodies and empty bottles, counting. Maybe twenty men, all of them dead to the world. Then he saw Malachar—stretched on a bedroll with two women on either side, arms flung wide. A straight shot for Cassidy. Maybe taking that one man down would knock the fight out of the rest. A man could hope.

He slid back into the cave and told Butch everything.

"All right," Cassidy said, looking over the faces in the dark. "I've only fought side by side with three of you, but I'm trustin' all of you now. The Brotherhood tied us together when they put us in those cages. I swear to you I won't stop swingin' till there's nothing left in me. Surrender's not an option. Those cages stay empty. From here on out, you're Wild Bunch. Now let's go break the Brotherhood."

Cassidy led the charge.

All twelve burst from the cave, screaming at the top of their lungs. The Brotherhood jerked awake, stumbling to their feet. Half were still drunk, their rifles and pistols out of reach. Clubs of iron hit first. Cassidy dropped three men on his way to the prize.

The women hit even harder. The Brotherhood had taken things from them that could never be given back, and their fury came out in every swing.

Malachar came to in the middle of the chaos. The two women at his sides clawed at him, trying to cling to his arms, but he threw them off and snatched up his machete. He rose, bloodshot eyes locking on Cassidy.

He went on the offensive. Malachar wasn't about to wait for whatever fate Butch had planned. He raised the blade high and swung just as Cassidy brought his jagged iron up. Metal smashed against metal, the shock running up both their arms. Neither gave ground.

A Brotherhood man rushed Cassidy from the side. Butch caught the movement in the corner of his eye, ducked low, and came up with a savage backhand swing. The iron caught the attacker on the temple, taking skin and blood with it. The man dropped boneless into the dust.

Butch turned back just in time to see Malachar already in motion. The machete came down in a killing arc. Cassidy threw himself aside—steel bit his arm instead of his neck. Pain flared hot, but he stayed on his feet, blocking another blow.

Malachar found a gap and, instead of ending it, turned his wrist and rapped Cassidy's nose with the flat of the blade. Bone crunched. Blood exploded across Butch's face. He went down hard.

Malachar loomed over him, machete lifting for the final stroke.

Butch lunged from his back, driving the shorter iron bar up into Malachar's thigh. The leader screamed, stumbling, and lost his balance. He tore the weapon free and flung it aside, blood running down his leg.

"Nice try," Malachar panted. "But you knew this was inevitable."

He sucked in a breath, straightened with a roar. "Death to the Bunch! Long live the Bro—"

The cry cut off with a wet, ugly sound as iron punched into the side of his neck.

His hands flew to the wound. He turned, eyes wide, to see who'd struck him.

Ann stood behind him, both hands on the bloody bar.

Around them, the fight was dying. The freed captives and the Wild Bunch had turned the tide; Brotherhood men lay scattered or were crawling away on hands and knees. Ann's gaze flicked to Butch just in time to see the machete slice his arm. She flinched, then pushed forward, moving toward them through the wreckage of men and firelight. She heard Malachar's scream as the iron went into his leg and saw the bar spin through the air when he threw it.

She caught it on the bounce, stepped in behind him, and drove it as hard as she could into the soft flesh of his neck.

Now, blinking through blood, he grabbed the iron and wrenched it out, dropping the machete. He turned fully to her, and for a heartbeat they stared at each other eye to eye.

Ann started to back away. He caught her by the hair and yanked her close, blood pulsing from the hole she'd made.

"Wouldn't break," Malachar rasped, grinning through red teeth, "but you can still be torn."

He raised the iron, dragging her in, lining it up over her heart.

Butch surged up behind him, machete in both hands, and drove the blade through Malachar's back and out his chest.

The Brotherhood leader spasmed, dropping both Ann and the iron. He clawed at the blade now lodged in him, but there was nothing left to do. Sundance, Kid Curry, one of the women, and two of the freed men reached them in time to watch Malachar sag to his knees and fall face-first into the dirt.

For a moment there was only the sound of ragged breathing and the crackle of dying fires.

Then the brush exploded.

Hundreds of men crashed out of the trees and rocks, surrounding the little knot of survivors. In one motion they leveled rifles, pistols, machetes, and clubs, and began to advance.

Cassidy wiped blood from his eyes and looked at his people—Roy, Sundance, Kid, Ann, the others with iron clenched in white-knuckled hands.

"It's been an honor," he said.

They lifted their scraps of iron and squared up, ready to spend whatever was left of their lives.

The Brotherhood rushed in—then stopped as one.

They saw Malachar lying in the dirt with a blade through him.

A silence rolled outward. One by one, weapons drooped. Men stepped back. Then, without a word from any leader, they began to turn away. Rifles and clubs fell into the dust. Lines broke. In twos and threes, then in larger knots, they walked back into the trees and vanished.

The little band stood there, breathing hard, waiting for a trick that didn't come.

They looked at the circle of empty ground where death had been a certainty a moment before. Iron scraps hung at their sides, slick with blood. No one spoke.

Finally, Cassidy exhaled. "We're done here," he said quietly. "Let's get to Hamilton. We've got property to reclaim… and goodbyes to say."

They gathered themselves—binding wounds, helping Ann to a horse, steadying Roy's bad leg—and turned their backs on the Veil, riding toward the town that had fed the Brotherhood and now had to live with what it had allowed.

Epilogue: “New Beginnings”

He rolled onto his side and the pain snapped him fully awake, a sharp reminder of the parting gift Malachar had left him. For a moment he couldn’t place where he was. Then he saw the clean bandages wrapped around his arm, neat and tight, and knew someone had taken their time on him.

It looked almost professional.

Butch swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood carefully. When he opened the door, a wash of heat and low voices met him. A small crowd was gathered around the hearth.

Sandra hurried over and slipped an arm around his waist. “Thank you, Mr. Cassidy. For everything.” Her voice broke and she started to cry.

He put his good arm around her shoulders. “My friends call me Butch,” he said, soft as he could manage.

She smiled through the tears and guided him to the couch. From there he took it all in: Sundance at the table with a tin cup of coffee, talking quietly with Fred; Joyce setting a plate in front of Kid Curry; Roy with his leg propped up, eating eggs Sherry had just slid onto his plate; Dr. Huffman moving from man to man, checking bandages and stitches like a mother hen with a medical bag.

How many had Hamilton lost? From the road in, Cassidy had thought the town was finished. Yet here were faces he didn’t expect to see again, ringed by firelight.

Sherry cleared her throat and raised her voice enough to carry. “I’m saying what everyone else in this town is thinking,” she said. “We’ll be in your debt the rest of our lives. We’ve been prisoners here fifteen years.”

She looked around at her neighbors—thinner than they ought to be, older than their years, but standing.

“And thanks to you,” she added, “we’re not anymore.”

Butch turned and saw her sitting near the fire. Ann. He crossed the room and eased himself down beside her.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said.

She smiled up at him. “So what sounds better? Ann Bassett Parker… or Ann Bassett Cassidy?”

“Cassidy’s got a nice ring to it,” he said. “Easy to remember. It’s as simple as A-B-C.”

She laughed, he did too, and for a moment the noise of the room fell away as they leaned together, holding on like they might never let go.

Miles away, a coyote loped down a narrow trail, tongue lolling. A rabbit flashed across the path and vanished into the brush. The coyote plunged after it, weaving between rocks and under a fallen log. The rabbit stopped to nibble in a small clearing, ears twitching.

The coyote crouched, crept closer, haunches bunching for the pounce.

An arrow hissed out of the trees and drove clean through him, pinning him to a rotting stump.

“Nice shot, Mordechai,” the hunter said. “Your pa would be proud.”

The boy tipped his head in a nod and started toward the kill.

“Go on,” the man said. “We’ll eat well tonight. Seems right, on the one-year mark since Butch Cassidy and his crew came through and ruined everything.”

His face hardened.

“If it’s the last thing I do,” he went on, “I’ll see the names Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid wiped out of every mouth in this country.”

He rested a hand on Mordechai’s shoulder.

“Long live the Brotherhood!”